

Fire and Wine

By Casey Dorman

Part 2

Chapters 17-28

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Chapter 17

Cloris' suitcase was open on the bed and she was taking clothing from the closet and the dresser and placing it in the open suitcase.

"You're leaving?" Nyles asked, feeling confused.

"Sarah and I are going to Sacramento. I told you that," Cloris answered, carefully folding a dress and placing it on top of the other clothing in her bag.

Nyles could feel his anxiety rising. "I didn't realize it would be so soon. How long will you be gone?"

"Only two days. We've made appointments with some women who are looking into the same kind of sexual predatory behavior in the capital that Sarah is interested in uncovering." She gazed at his face, which he knew showed his concern. "Don't worry. I'll be fine."

"So I'll be here in the Overmans' house all by myself," he said. He was aware that he was trying to play on her sympathy, and it made him feel guilty, but not enough to stop himself. He didn't really mind being alone, but he worried about his wife going off somewhere without him. He wanted to say something about her drinking, but he didn't want to start an argument before she left.

She told him that getting involved in a campaign to expose sexual predation in politics was very personal for Sarah, since she suspected that her husband had been guilty of such behavior and she had never done anything about it. Nyles could understand Sarah's feeling. "I know it's personal for her," he said.

"And for me," Cloris answered.

Her words caught him by surprise. "What do you mean?"

She looked down at the floor, then heaved a sigh. When she looked up at him, she had a determined look on her face. “There’s something I never told you about.”

He felt his heart jump. “What do you mean?”

Continuing to look him in the eyes, she told him how she had been propositioned by a casting director when she’d first arrived in Hollywood, before Nyles had come out to join her and before they were married. She had not succumbed, but she felt that her refusal of the director’s advances had cost her a part in what turned out to be a major film.

Nyles was shocked—and angry. He and Cloris had been dating when she’d moved to Hollywood to pursue her career. He was still with the Boston Police force and he’d worried about her being alone—especially considering things he’d heard about Hollywood in those days. “You never told me.” He struggled to keep the feeling of betrayal out of his voice. It had been more than forty years ago, but he was still stung by the revelation that someone had tried to force his wife-to-be into having sex.

She was being forthright, but he could see the apprehension on her face. Even now, decades later, she was afraid of his reaction. He realized the impossible predicament she had been in. She had been right not to tell him, although he marveled that she had kept something so important from him for so many years. Back then he would have overreacted. If he felt betrayed now, how would he have felt when he was a young man in his twenties? And where was the betrayal? Cloris had done nothing except to keep her experience to herself. It made him feel hurt and isolated from her... but that was stupid. She had sat down on the bed and he sat down next to her and put his arm around her shoulder. “You were right not to tell me. I wasn’t mature enough to handle it back then.”

He felt her body relax as she leaned against him. “That’s why I know what so many young women who got jobs had to go through to get them or to keep them,” she said. “Anyway, since nothing happened, I decided it was best if I never mentioned it.”

She was right, even though he still felt betrayed—but that was his problem, not hers. Now that she had told him, he also knew that it was important that she accompany Sarah to Sacramento. Sexual predation by men in power was a cancer that needed to be exposed and removed, and it took women to do it. He thanked her for telling him about her own encounter, even if it was more than forty years later. Since she’d been open with him, he made a decision and told her about his fears of her drinking too much when she was with Sarah. He hoped he wasn’t opening up a can of worms.

Cloris gazed down at the floor. They still sat next to each other on the bed. She nodded her head. “I’ve gone overboard here a couple of times, and I don’t blame you for worrying, but I’m aware of it and I’ve already talked to Sarah about keeping our drinking under control.” She put her own arm around him and gave him a hug. “I know you worry and I appreciate it.” She stood up. “But everything will be OK.”

Nyles felt relieved. He watched her resume her packing. He told her what Howard Goode had told him. “I can’t say anything to Sarah about Ronnie,” he said, “but I need to talk to both Ronnie and to Phil MacDonald and hear their sides of the story.”

Sarah stopped her packing and looked at him. “You’re still certain that Ronnie had nothing to do with Martin’s death?”

Was he? It hadn’t made sense that Ronnie would have broken into his mother’s house and stolen the wrong computer, but from what Howard Goode had told him, Ronnie had as much

to fear from his father's memoir as did the winegrowers. And Ronnie knew from his conversations with Shari Randall, what his father had included in the memoir—he'd even recommended Shari for the job so that he could monitor what his father was writing. He still had a hard time believing a son would kill his own father. "I'm pretty sure about Ronnie, but he's got some explaining to do. So does Phil MacDonald. Martin never mentioned Phil in his memoir, but Howard Goode said he'd told him about the bribes and Phil ignored it."

"Well I don't have to worry about you keeping busy while I'm gone, but be careful. If someone killed Martin, you're taking a chance by trying to expose them." She gazed at him tenderly. "You know you could just turn everything over to Phil MacDonald. You don't have to do everything yourself. And I don't think Sarah's going to want you pursuing anything that could get Ronnie in trouble."

"Phil MacDonald might be implicated himself . . . not in Martin's murder, if that's what it is, but in covering up the bribery. I'm going to talk to him about it. I'll tell him everything I've learned so far."

"But you're going to keep investigating yourself." She said it as a statement, not a question.

How could he tell her that he felt more invigorated, tracking down what might be a murder, than he had in a long time. He wondered how selfish he was being. Bringing up the bribery was going to expose both his close friend, Sheriff MacDonald and Sarah's son, Ronnie. And for what, his own ego? His need to feel as if he was still a competent detective? That he wasn't becoming senile? Whatever was driving him, he couldn't let go of the case.

"I'm not ready to let it go," he told her. He was pretty sure that she understood.

“Be careful,” was all she said, squeezing his hand.

“I always am.”

Chapter 18

Phil MacDonald's red face showed that he was angry...and embarrassed. "What the hell are you doing digging into those old stories about Martin Overman taking bribes?" He was sitting behind his desk in his office and Nyles was opposite him.

Nyles could see that his old friend was defensive—and upset. His round face looked like an oversized child who was about to throw a tantrum. Nyles wasn't surprised, since he'd just asked him about a topic that, according to Howard Goode, might have involved him burying evidence. Nyles explained that he'd been following leads from the attempted theft of Martin's computer and from the information that was contained in the memoir.

"And you think that's related to Martin's death?" The sheriff had a broad scowl on his face, which had not yet regained its normal color.

"Someone didn't want the information in that memoir to get out," Nyles answered. "Stealing Martin's computer would be one way to get rid of it... but killing Martin could be another. Martin virtually admitted that he'd taken bribes to suppress any effort to regulate arsenic levels in wine. According to Howard Goode, the bribes went through Ronnie Overman... Martin's memoir said as much."

"Howard Goode is an environmental fearmonger, especially about anything related to wine. He didn't have any real evidence... only speculation."

"Did you investigate his speculations?" He stared his fellow peace officer in the face.

MacDonald's scowl had subsided into a frown. "No one wanted that kind of thing investigated," he muttered. He was gazing down at his desk, avoiding looking Nyles directly in the face.

Nyles felt himself getting irritated. “What does that mean?”

The sheriff gazed at the wall. He was still trying not to look directly at Nyles, whose eyes were glued on him. “It means I turned a blind eye to the whole thing.”

Nyles felt as if he’d just been kicked in the gut. “Why?”

MacDonald turned back to Nyles. “This county lives and breathes by the wine industry. The county supervisors can remove me from office—which they made clear they would do if I acted on any of what Goode had dug up. Dolores was sick and we had a lot of medical bills. I couldn’t afford to lose my job.”

Nyles remembered MacDonald’s wife’s illness, to which she’d finally succumbed. He also remembered when Cloris had been ill. He’d have done anything to give her the medical help she needed at the time. Nothing had come up that required him to compromise his job, but what would he have done if it had? His indignation was replaced by guilt. Who was he to pass judgment on his friend’s decision? “That’s water under the bridge,” he said. He looked MacDonald in the eye. “I’d like to reopen Martin’s case, though.”

“Why are you so hung up on this? You’re already turning over some rocks that might be better left in place.”

It was that same question that kept returning. Following up on Martin Overman’s memoir was stirring up issues that were unpleasant to a lot of people—people he cared about such as Phil MacDonald and Ronnie Overman. If he kept going, he might bring Sarah more unhappiness than satisfaction. Why couldn’t he let it go?

“Have you ever dropped a case because the solving it might hurt too many people?” he asked, looking back at MacDonald.

“I told you I didn’t investigate Howard Goode’s allegations because it might have hurt a lot of powerful people.”

“You were pressured to stop. Have you ever just stopped on your own?”

“Murder cases almost always have a lot more victims than the one who was killed. If we worried about that, we’d never solve any cases.”

Nyles nodded. He felt the same way.

“Does Sarah want you to keep pursuing this?” the sheriff asked.

“She doesn’t know what I’ve found yet.”

“But you’re hooked.”

Was he? Or was he still just trying to give himself some purpose—prove that he hadn’t lost his edge? He knew there was an emptiness inside of him that he didn’t want to face . . . and a question about his competence—whether he was losing it. He didn’t want to discuss that with his friend. “I’m hooked enough to want the case investigated further,” he answered.

MacDonald shook his head. “I can’t call it a homicide. The D.A. won’t go for it. You’ll need more evidence than an attempted robbery and some ravings from a man with Alzheimer’s... or even a cover up of something from years ago.”

“How about just mark it open instead of closed. You can take another look at the evidence. You, yourself said that they bagged a lot of stuff but never looked at it... and you’ve still got Martin’s car. Have them give it another, closer look.”

“What are we supposed to be looking for?”

“I don’t know. Maybe something that would suggest he was attacked somewhere else, that his body was transported in the car. See if you can find anything.”

MacDonald nodded. “What are you going to do?”

“I haven’t talked to that trucker—Giuseppe Malta—yet.”

MacDonald shook his head. “He’s a piece of work. And watch out for his sons. They took over while their father was in prison... kept the business going. But they’re rough characters... and they’ve always thought their father got shafted. You want me to go with you?” He appeared to have gotten over his embarrassment... and his anger.

Nyles shook his head. “That would make them clam up. I want this to be more informal. Maybe I can get some information out of them if they think I’m on their side.”

Phil MacDonald’s scowl returned. “Good luck with that.”

Chapter 19

The Malta and Sons Trucking Company was located at the end of a long road that meandered between open fields, planted in some kind of crop Nyles didn't recognize, before it arrived at a small industrial park on the outskirts of Napa. As Nyles drove along the route he thought about how he was going to get Giuseppe Malta to talk to him. He was also thinking about his wife and doing his best to calm his anxiety about her. She and Sarah had left that morning before he had gone to talk to Phil MacDonald in Santa Rosa. They'd be busy today, driving and then talking to other women, particularly the heads of activist groups who were working on the same issue as they were. It was tonight that worried him. Tonight they'd go to dinner, perhaps with others, and then sit and talk about what they planned to do... talk and drink. He had to quell his nerves. He couldn't be there to watch over Cloris every minute. There was no reason he should be, he told himself, although he was aware of only half-believing it. It seemed as if he always needed something to worry about.

Turning his thoughts back to Giuseppe Malta and the challenge at hand, he realized he knew almost nothing about the Italian-American trucker. Phil MacDonald had described Malta as "a blowhard and a hothead" and as "a piece of work," but that didn't tell Nyles much, except that he was an unpleasant character. He knew Malta had held a grudge against Martin Overman for years, and that he'd claimed to have some kind of information against Overman, which he'd threatened to expose. The memoir had suggested that Martin might have been complicit in framing Malta for a crime committed by someone else who was a big contributor to the District Attorney's campaign. What Nyles wondered was how much he should reveal to Malta about what Martin had said in his memoir. The former District Attorney had practically admitted framing Malta. Martin could no longer be hurt by whatever information was revealed about his

past behavior, but Sarah possibly could, even if it was just by tarnishing her late husband's name. He wondered again whether his following up on Martin's memoir might not risk raising more issues than it solved, but he'd gone this far and he wasn't ready to end his investigation yet.

Malta and Sons Trucking Company was in a small, low wooden building, which looked like an aging office structure, perhaps dating from the 1950's, behind which was a large fenced-in yard, which held a number of trucks and at the back of which stood a warehouse, several times larger and newer than the office in front. In the yard were at least ten truck tractors, parked haphazardly, some without trailers and several with flatbeds or containers attached to them, three of them backed up to the warehouse for either loading or unloading. He could see men working on the warehouse dock. Nyles pulled into the parking lot in front of the office.

A slim, young, dark-haired woman sat at a desk just inside the front door. Nyles asked if he could see Giuseppe Malta.

"And your name?" the girl said with a sweet smile.

He told her his name and said he was an acquaintance of Martin Overman. He figured that using Martin's name would get the trucker's attention. She picked up her phone and relayed the information to whomever was on the other end.

A short, wiry, 70 plus man with a shiny, balding head and glasses, dressed in slacks and a white shirt but no tie, flung open a door in the back of the lobby and came bounding into the room, his chin lifted high and a look of belligerence on his face. "You're a friend of Martin Overman?" he asked, jutting his chin out even further. Nyles thought in front short of him.

Nyles introduced himself and put out his hand.

Malta ignored Nyles' proffered handshake. "Why are you here? Overman's dead, not that I'm sorry, even if you are a friend of his." The trucker glared at him from beneath a pair of shaggy eyebrows.

"I'm doing some investigating of his death for the family," Nyles answered. "I'm following up on your claim that you had material you could use to expose Mr. Overman as a criminal of some kind." He figured that the best approach was an honest one, and he hoped that it would get Malta to divulge whatever he knew, although he was really interested in assessing whether the man's hatred of Martin was enough to cause Malta to kill him.

Malta put his hand on his hips and stuck out his chest, as if he was ready to fight. "That bastard lied about me and put me in jail. He ruined my life and he ruined my business. Now he's dead and I'll never get the revenge I deserve."

Nyles asked if they couldn't sit down somewhere and talk. Malta shook his head, but then motioned him into his office, which was sparse, with a worn leather chair and a couch and a number of steel file cabinets against the wall. A window behind the desk looked out onto the yard and warehouse. Nyles could see a truck just leaving the loading dock. It was pulling a trailer labeled with the name of a winery Nyles had never heard of.

He took a seat in front of the desk. Malta sat in the leather chair and looked at him challengingly. Nyles eyed the window. "Looks as if you still have a pretty good business going."

"No thanks to your friend Overman. My sons kept the business going while I was in prison. We'd be twice this big if I'd never been put away on those trumped up charges. Demming Industries has 90 percent of the wine growers' hauling and warehousing business. All because they were willing to pay Overman and I wasn't."

They were interrupted by a knock on the door. Malta yelled for whoever it was to come in, and a large, heavysset man in his mid-forties pushed open the door. He was twice the size of the man behind the desk, but he had the same features and the same combative look on his face. He was dressed in jeans and a leather jacket, like a truck driver. He had was wearing a baseball cap. "I heard one of Overman's friends was here to see you," he said, looking daggers at Nyles.

"My son, Frank," Malta said, waving his arm in the direction of the man, who stood in the middle of the room, his hands on his hips, in the same stance his father had had when he'd greeted Nyles. "It's Ok, Frank, I'm handling this. Get back out into the yard and make sure they don't screw up one of the loads."

The son shot an angry glance at this father. "You sure you don't want me to throw this guy out?"

"Get outa here," his father growled. He turned back to Nyles. "My son's not one for manners. He's protective of me, after what happened. The whole family got fucked over by Overman."

"His wife said you made a lot of threats when you first went to jail," Nyles said.

"Sure I did. But what could I do? I was in jail and he was making a name for himself, first as D.A. then as a senator... big deal. He was still a crook."

"Is that something you can prove... or could have before Martin died?"

"Martin is it? I guess you *are* friends." Malta drew back, swelling up his chest, like a rooster. "He never had any real evidence against me. I didn't steal from the growers, that was Ralph Demming and his outfit... the one who got all the growers' business after I was sent to Vacaville."

He could see that none of Malta's anger had lessened over the years he'd been in prison. Nyles wondered if the man really did have evidence against Martin. He told Malta that Sarah Overman had said that he had threatened to expose her husband's dishonesty.

"So what?" Malta snarled. "Are you trying to protect him? It's too late, he's dead."

"I'm not trying to protect him at all. In fact, I'm inclined to believe you. I don't think Martin Overman was an honest man, not as a D.A. and probably not as a senator, but the way he died seems suspicious to me and I'm trying to figure out who he wronged enough that he might have killed him." He didn't say that he had evidence from Martin's memoir that he had colluded with someone—probably the Demming company—to present false evidence against Malta. Nyles wasn't trying to right *that* wrong—at least not yet—he didn't want to provide an obviously vindictive Giuseppe Malta with ammunition to ruin Sarah Overman's life, now that her husband was gone.

Nyles's mention of Overman possibly being murdered seemed to catch Malta by surprise. After his initial look of shock, he broke into a smile. "So somebody may have knocked Overman off, eh? Well he deserved it." He suddenly became serious; Nyles thought he might even be frightened. "Don't try to pin that on me, too. I hated the bastard but I didn't kill him."

"But you did threaten him."

Malta's face had a sheepish look on it instead of the belligerent aggressiveness he had shown before. "That was just talk. I was angry... I still am. But what would be the point after all these years? I'm trying to help my sons keep this business afloat, not settle old grudges."

Malta sounded scared. Nyles wasn't sure whether to believe the man or not. He couldn't help wondering about the angry son he'd met... and he knew there must be another son around

somewhere—probably just as angry. Were they upset with Martin enough to go after him, now that their father was safely home from prison? Was their father’s anger fueling their own? Nyles hadn’t found out much, except that Giuseppe Malta was the blowhard that Phil MacDonald had said he was and that he probably didn’t have any evidence against Martin Overman at all—just anger. The question was whether it was enough anger to cause him to commit murder.

Chapter 20

Driving back to the Overmans' house in the waning hours of daylight, Nyles realized that he would be alone that night. His thoughts went back to Cloris. She was probably having dinner about now. Would she consume more wine than she should? His worry was useless and simply raised his anxiety without accomplishing anything. Still, he thought he would call her later in the evening, just to be sure she was OK. She would expect him to call anyway.

He was debating whether to go out to dinner himself or fix something at Sarah's house—he hadn't paid attention when the two women had told him what was available in the refrigerator. There were a lot of good restaurants in Napa, but he felt guilty going out somewhere fancy without Cloris. Maybe he'd pick up a pizza or a hamburger someplace. He glanced in the rearview mirror and saw a pickup truck closing rapidly on him. He slowed and pulled over near the edge of the road to let the impatient driver past. Instead, the truck pulled over too, one wheel on the shoulder, but still getting nearer. Was this the same guy from the night before? He'd only seen the other vehicle vaguely because it was dark, but he didn't remember it as a pickup and its headlights hadn't seemed raised up high as were those on this truck. He decided this was someone else... or at least a different vehicle.

There was enough twilight for him to see that the truck was black and shiny. Nyles could read its Chevrolet logo on the hood as it closed to within feet of his rear bumper. He felt a bump. For God's sake, he thought, he really is trying to run me off the road. The two vehicles were on the stretch of two-lane road that ran from the industrial area toward the center of town. Nyles knew that within less than a mile he would be in an area with more traffic. He speeded up, his hands clammy with sweat, but this time he was more angry than frightened. Whatever the game was, he was getting tired of it. He jammed his foot on the gas pedal and his Prius forged ahead.

The pickup was slow to react and when he had about thirty yards on it he quickly pulled all the way onto the shoulder of the road. Whoever it was would have to confront him face to face.

The black pickup slammed on its brakes, then crept slowly toward Nyles' Prius. At least he's not going to ram me, Nyles thought. He waited inside of his car, his seat belt unfastened. He reached over and opened the glove compartment. Inside was a Glock—a gun he was licensed to carry—that he kept in the car because of his private detective work. He'd never used it, but he'd used his service weapon when he was a detective—used it to kill when he'd had to. He checked that the gun was loaded and the safety off, then laid it on the seat beside him. It was only a last resort if he felt his life was in danger.

The black pickup had pulled back into the middle of the road and it looked as if it was going to pull alongside. Nyles rolled down his window so he could see better. He noted the make of the truck and that it was a recent model. It was too dark to see the driver clearly, except in outline. He could tell he was wearing a baseball cap, but that was about all. He was reminded of Giuseppe Malta's son, who had been wearing a baseball cap... but so did a lot of other pickup truck drivers. The truck pulled up alongside and sat for a moment, idling, the driver's face still obscured by the shadows. Then the driver punched the gas and the truck took off with a screech of tires. Nyles noted the license plate number and repeated it to himself a few times while he pulled out his pen and notebook, then wrote the number down.

He returned the Glock to the glove compartment. This had been a warning, he thought. Another warning. He guessed he was getting close to something.

He was sure he'd taken the right road, but none of the houses or street names looked familiar. He realized he had been thinking about his home neighborhood, not Napa. Had the encounter with the pickup truck disoriented him? It suddenly occurred to him that this is what Alzheimer's must feel like. Was this his first symptom? He felt lightheaded. Perhaps he'd had a stroke. He slowed the Prius to a crawl, swiveling his head to see if he could spot any landmarks to tell him where he was. In another fifty yards was an intersection. He strained to read the name of the street, the sweat starting to pool under his arms. It was the name of Overman's street. He hadn't been lost at all, just disoriented, failing to recognize the route he'd traveled several times before, but following it nevertheless. He decided that he was under more stress than he'd realized. Ahead he could see Sarah Overman's house.

He had no appetite. He looked in the refrigerator and found a six pack of Samuel Adams that Sarah had no doubt bought in anticipation of his visit. He opened one and downed it in four gulps, not bothering to sit down. He pulled another Sam Adams from the refrigerator, opened it, and took a seat at the kitchen table. He hadn't thought he was that frightened by the pickup truck following him, but perhaps he was. He forcefully dismissed the alternative explanation—that his mind had experienced a lapse, related to some kind of neurological episode—as a possibility he refused to deal with. He needed to focus on his investigation. Someone wanted him to back off. Was it Giuseppe Malta, or perhaps one of his hotheaded sons? Or it could be the Napa Valley Wine Consortium, who must know what he'd found in Martin's memoir, since Shari Randall now worked for them. Or was it someone else, someone he didn't yet know about?

He drank his second beer in gulps. Had he really been prepared to shoot whoever was trying to run him off the road? He had only taken out the Glock in case the pickup driver had begun shooting at him, and then, he'd only use it if he couldn't get away. But he'd stopped the

Prius in order to confront whoever it was. What had he thought would happen? A confrontation that forced him to use a weapon would have been senseless. Stopping to face the driver of the truck had been stupid on his part. Nyles recognized that his anger had gotten the best of him. He was usually able to keep his emotions in check, but not this time. At least, though, he'd gotten a good look at the truck. He'd ask Phil MacDonald to run down the license number. He was willing to bet that it was one of Giuseppe Malta's sons. There had been no company logo, so it had to be someone's personal vehicle.

He pulled another Sam Adams out of the refrigerator. The beer was calming him down. He thought about his next step. Visiting the Wine Consortium would get him nothing but denials, just as he'd gotten from Giuseppe Malta. The one person who knew about the Wine Consortium bribes was Martin's son Ronnie, because the money had been funneled through his business. Nyles sipped on his beer and thought about confronting Ronnie with what Howard Goode had told him. So far, he'd stayed away from Ronnie, because he didn't want to hurt Sarah. The fact was, he hoped that Ronnie wasn't involved. But of course he was—at least with the bribery. But the bribery wasn't an issue that was going to be reinvestigated, particularly not by Phil MacDonald, who would only implicate himself. Nyles didn't want that either. So Ronnie didn't have anything to fear if he came clean. Getting him to come clean wouldn't be easy.

He finished the third beer then opened another. He should call Cloris. He pushed the beer a distance away from him as he dialed her on his cell phone. He knew she couldn't see him, but he felt self-conscious checking up on her drinking while he was having a fourth beer. Checking up on her made him feel guilty anyway, and now he felt worse that he was pretending that he, himself, wasn't drinking. He forced his guilt-ridden ruminations from his head and made the call.

Cloris sounded happy over the phone. She and Sarah were back in their hotel. They were both exhausted from their meetings with several women during the day. Sarah had made connections with two different groups that were involved in revealing incidents of sexual predation within the political establishment. Tomorrow they were meeting with a third group, this one more militant, according to Cloris. They both were going to bed early. Nyles told her he'd had a productive discussion with Phil MacDonald. He didn't mention the incident with the pickup truck. After he ended the call he finished his beer and opened another. He drank it more slowly, then took a shower and went to bed. He never did eat anything.

Chapter 21

Nyles had made himself a cup of coffee using Sarah's Keurig machine, but his head still was foggy from the five beers he'd consumed the previous night, and he needed something in his stomach. He stopped at a Starbucks and bought a Grande black coffee, and an apricot muffin. He finished the muffin in the car, but he was still hungry, so he went through a McDonald's drive-thru and got himself an Egg McMuffin. By the time he was halfway to Sonoma and Ronnie Overman's real estate office, his lap and the floor of the Prius looked as if someone had sprayed him in muffin and biscuit crumbs, but at least his head was back to normal.

He'd decided to confront Ronnie with the information in Martin's memoir, which implied that Ronnie had assisted his father with a bribery scheme from a group of wine growers. He knew from Howard Goode that it was the Napa Valley Wine Consortium to which Martin had been referring. If Ronnie wasn't forthcoming, he would then present him with the details he had learned from Howard Goode. In order to gain Ronnie's cooperation, Nyles knew that he'd have to reassure him that he wasn't planning to charge him with anything, and neither was Sheriff MacDonald.

The city of Sonoma was filled with historical landmarks, not the least of which was the majestic two-story stone City Hall in the center of the town's large, historic plaza, a plaza, besides which contained a park and a children's playground, with mothers watching children on swing sets or tending babies in strollers. Vendors were selling fruits and ice cream. Around the perimeter were shops and bars and restaurants. The scene reminded him of some of the plazas he'd seen in Mexico when he and Cloris had visited, although this one was more upscale than those they'd encountered in any Mexican villages. On a side street, not far from the plaza was Ronnie Overman's real estate office, itself located in a meticulously restored historic building,

which also housed another realtor and two lawyers' offices. Ronnie employed two other real estate agents, both of whom sat at desks out front, along with a secretary-receptionist, but he had his own private office. His door was open and when he saw Nyles enter, he came out to greet him. He was dressed casually, but expensively, in a powder blue sport coat, an open collar shirt and a pair of dark slacks.

“This is a pleasant surprise,” Ronnie said, although Nyles thought he looked apprehensive. “Just in the neighborhood?”

“Actually, I’m here to see you. Can we go into your office?” Nyles responded.

“I’m kind of busy,” Ronnie said, hesitating. He had a wary look on his face.

“This is important. It’s about your father.”

Ronnie sighed, then showed Nyles into his office. He shut the door, then took a seat behind his desk. Nyles sat in one of the two plush desk chairs in front of the desk where customers sat when they signed real estate documents.

He began by telling Ronnie what his father had said in his memoir. Ronnie looked surprised, then dismissed it as “the ravings of a man with dementia.” Nyles told him what he’d learned about the Wine Consortium making fake purchases of land and using the broker’s fees as a method of paying bribes to Martin through his son’s real estate company. He didn’t mention that Howard Goode was his source.

Ronnie’s expression had become suspicious. Nyles could see the fear in his eyes. “The sheriff found no evidence of that. It was all a vicious rumor,” Ronnie said.

“The sheriff isn’t interested in any of this, and I’m not interested opening up something that would only embarrass your mother,” Nyles said. “What interests me is finding out who

burglarized your mother's house in order to gain possession of your father's memoir and if anyone was concerned enough about what your father was saying to want to kill him."

Nyles words seemed to deflate Ronnie. He sat gazing at his desk, a look of deep worry on his face. "Shari told me the things my father was telling her to write. I was scared that he would get someone to publish it, even though she said that most of it made no sense. I told the people at the Wine Consortium about it—I had to, it involved them— and they had her send them a copy. They said they weren't worried, but when my father died, they offered Shari a job, more or less as a thank you."

"Would they have broken into your parents' house to get your father's copy? Did you give them a key?"

Ronnie's face showed his shock. He appeared insulted by Nyles' suggestion. "Do you think I'd help someone break into my mother's house?"

Nyles didn't think so and he told Ronnie that. "Then Shari must have given someone her key," he said. "After all, she works for them."

Nyles could see the fury on Ronnie's face. "Damn them! Why would they do something like that? I could have erased my father's memoir if they were that worried about it."

"Maybe they thought you were too close to the situation. And perhaps you weren't as worried as they were."

"Do you really think they could have killed Dad?" Ronnie asked. Nyles could see he was having a hard time believing such a thing.

Nyles thought about it. The Wine Consortium knew about Martin's memoir; in fact they had a copy that Shari Randall had given them. They could have easily asked Shari to erase the

memoir even with Martin alive. Since he had Alzheimer's, he wouldn't have known. Nyles had seen the memoir. There was zero chance that anyone would have published it. It was mostly incoherent. And what clinched things in Nyles mind was that Sheriff MacDonald wouldn't have prosecuted them on the bribery issue anyway, even if the memoir had named them—which it didn't—and they knew that, since they'd been through the same situation years before. The sheriff couldn't reopen the bribery issue without implicating himself for having ignored the evidence earlier.

“I can't see any reason that anyone from the Wine Consortium would have killed your father... not because of his memoir, anyway,” Nyles said.

“But you think he was murdered?” Ronnie asked.

“I'm not sure anymore,” Nyles answered, and he felt profoundly bothered that he didn't know.

Chapter 22

“I’m not sure what to think,” Nyles told Phil MacDonald. They were in MacDonald’s office at the Napa County Sheriff’s Department. MacDonald was listening to Nyles’ report of his discussion with Ronnie Overman as well as his interview with Giuseppe Malta and the effort of the pickup truck to drive him off the road afterward. He told MacDonald the license number of the truck and the sheriff gave it to one of his deputies to look up in the DMV. Nyles also told MacDonald about the earlier event that was similar, although the vehicle involved was a different one.

The sheriff had been listening with interest, but Nyles could tell that he was just waiting for him to finish so he could say something himself. “CSI opened the bags from the crime scene. We found rug fibers on Martin’s clothing,” MacDonald said eyeing Nyles closely to see how he reacted to his news. “Lots of rug fibers, as if he’d been dragged across a rug. They were mixed in with the leaves and dirt from where we found his body, but I’m gonna take a look inside his house, and they’re checking the car.” The sheriff had a grim smile on his face as he continued to stare at Nyles, waiting for his reaction.

Nyles was stunned. He had been ready to conclude that the account of Martin Overman having driven himself away from the house, then wandered into a fire was what had actually happened. He was ready to suspend his investigation. He even was feeling relieved that he wouldn’t have to risk any more damage to anyone with his prying into things, even as he felt his anxiety starting to creep back as he faced the prospect of nothing to occupy his mind or his time. But if Martin had been attacked in his house and driven to the grove of trees and dumped there, then he really had been murdered, and somebody was responsible for it. His thoughts were moving quickly. “If he was assaulted at the house that day, it’s going to be a bitch to find

evidence now. There's been three people living in the house, a burglary, and of course an entire after-funeral gathering with at least thirty people. The Napa police took fingerprints off the front door and from the files and file cabinet in the study after the burglary."

"We got their report on the prints. They didn't find any except Martin's, his secretary's, his wife's and yours and Cloris' in the study, so whoever was in the house wore gloves. But we can match the carpet fibers, no matter how many people have been in the house. And we'll scour the place for evidence of blood."

"I'd like to be there when you do that," Nyles told him. He could feel himself becoming energized. It was a feeling he welcomed, despite his earlier willingness to end his investigation.

MacDonald nodded. "Let's go then. I'll tell the CSI team to meet us at the house."

Nyles let the two members of the CSI team into the house, while he and Sheriff MacDonald waited for them to take samples of the living room and hall carpets, then photograph the room using Luminol to bring out any blood residue. With the drapes drawn to dampen the light, the Luminol allowed Nyles to see that there were tiny spots of blood on the carpet, which showed up like flecks of phosphorous, and on the bottom of a metal vase that sat on top of a table next to the couch. Even if someone had cleaned the place, they wouldn't have gotten every trace of blood, something which always reminded Nyles of Lady Macbeth's futile effort to cleanse herself of imaginary traces of Duncan's blood. The crime scene people bagged the vase. Assuming the carpet fibers were a match to those on Martin's clothing, which had been bagged at autopsy and not examined until the sheriff had reopened the case, the blood strongly suggested that the senator had been struck with the vase and dragged from his own home. Nyles was pretty

sure that Martin's car would also show evidence of both carpet fibers and blood. Someone had probably wiped any obvious blood from the car, but, as the rug and vase showed, it was next to impossible to get rid of all traces of it.

“ We'll have to match the blood, but it looks like we have a murder,” Sheriff MacDonald said, interrupting Nyles' thoughts. “You were right all along.”

Nyles still felt invigorated by the presence of real evidence. Then he realized what this would mean to Sarah and he was immediately awash with guilt. If Martin had died of a simple accident, due to his Alzheimer's disease, things would be much simpler for everyone, particularly Sarah, who would now have to wonder who wanted to kill her husband. Nyles had already decided that neither Giuseppe Malta nor Sarah's son Ronnie had killed Martin, but could he have been wrong? He would have to consider everything anew. He began trying to reconstruct what must have happened. He shared his thoughts with MacDonald. “Someone hit Martin with the vase, then dragged him out of the house. Whoever it was must have put him in his own car then driven it to the grove of trees, which was on fire, and put the body in the middle of the fire. I'm not sure whether or not they knew he was still alive.”

“It's murder either way,” the sheriff answered. He was listening intently to Nyles' analysis of the situation.

“If someone drove Martin's car and left it at the scene, that means there were probably at least two people. Someone had to drive the person who drove Martin's car back... unless he or she hitchhiked or walked back.”

“I assume they took Martin’s car in order to make it look like he drove there himself. That’s why they left it there,” MacDonald said. “We’ll check it for prints, which we never did because we thought it was an accident.”

“They apparently forgot to leave the car key,” Nyles observed. He was trying to decide if it looked more like a planned killing or an opportunistic one... or perhaps even an accident of some sort. According to Ronnie Overman, his father could become violent... at least toward his wife. But if someone were defending himself—or herself— why stage an accidental death? Particularly Ronnie, who, by his own admission, had intervened physically with his father before and would have no reason to cover up an accident, even one in which the victim was killed.

“I’ll have to tell Sarah,” Phil MacDonald said, interrupting Nyles’ thoughts.

I should be the one to tell Sarah, Nyles thought. He could enlist Cloris’ help. He told MacDonald and the sheriff agreed. The truth was, he thought to himself, that Sarah had never fully accepted the idea that her husband had died accidentally—that’s why she’d asked him to look into it. It suddenly occurred to him that she might know more than she’d told him, although he couldn’t think why she would ask him to investigate and then keep information from him. Perhaps he was letting his imagination get away from him.

The Crime Scene team was finished. They took their cameras and their samples and the vase they’d bagged and loaded it all in their van. Phil MacDonald promised to let Nyles know what the results of the analyses were, both from the house and from the car. “Then we need to get together and compare notes,” he told Nyles. “This is an active investigation now and you’ve found out more than we have so far. You’ve told me some of what you’ve found out, but I need to know it all.”

Nyles agreed, but he wasn't sure how much of what he'd found out that was relevant. Maybe none, maybe all of it. He asked MacDonald to call his deputy and find out if he'd identified the owner of the black pickup truck. MacDonald made the call. His face was deadpan as he gave the information to Nyles.

“It was Danny Malta, the old man's youngest son. You want me to pick him up?”

That was a different son than the one who'd interrupted the talk with their father. That had been Frank Malta. Nyles was still hoping to get more information out of their father. Charging his son with something would probably just make Giuseppe Malta clam up... and his son probably hadn't committed a crime anyway. It would just be Nyles' word against his. He told MacDonald to hold off. He wanted to find out more from Malta if he could. He wondered if the son was acting on his own or under his father's orders. If it was the latter, that put Giuseppe Malta or one of his family right back in the spotlight as a suspect in Martin's death.

Chapter 23

Although she had never fully accepted the story that her husband had driven away in his car and then wandered into a live fire—all on his own accord—Sarah was shocked when Nyles told her that Sheriff MacDonald was now considering Martin’s death a homicide. The thought that someone had viciously killed Martin visibly frightened her. She sat on the couch in the living room, her eyes wide. Nyles wondered why he had thought that she might be holding back information from him and now he felt guilty that he had harbored such suspicions. She was clearly surprised and devastated by the news. He tried to reassure her that she was in no danger, but she immediately asked him if there was a connection between the burglary in her house and Martin’s murder. He had to tell her he wasn’t sure. When she asked him what was in the memoir, he had no choice but to tell her. He told her about the contents of the memoir, including Martin’s admission that he had probably framed Giuseppe Malta. He was reluctant to tell her about the involvement of her son as an intermediary in accepting a bribe from the Wine Consortium, but when she announced that she was going to read the memoir herself, he felt as if he was forced to reveal that also. As soon he told her, she was crushed, as he’d expected she would be. She blamed Martin more than Ronnie, whom she said wouldn’t have known how to refuse his father’s request. Nyles decided he would allow her to learn of Martin’s stories about other women by reading about them herself.

Far from being depressed by Martin’s braggadocious confirmation of his philandering, Sarah surprised Nyles by appearing to be energized. Nyles realized that he had underestimated her strength. She put her husband’s admissions together with the information she had gathered from the women she’d talked to in Sacramento and resolved to become even more active in fighting male sexual predation in California’s political establishment. Although he could see the

determination on her face, Nyles suspected that Sarah was using her indignation about her husband's sexual behavior to avoid thinking about his murder or her son's part in the bribery scheme mentioned in the memoir, but, whatever the reason, he was glad that she reacted as she did. It was better than her succumbing to depression.

While Sarah continued to study the memoir, Cloris shared with Nyles what she and Sarah had found out during their trip to Sacramento. Martin Overman routinely recruited student interns or young women who were part of the *Capital Fellows Program*, either students, recent graduates, or sometimes those with exceptional life experiences, who wanted to find out, from the inside, how politics worked in the state capital. According to Cloris, the more she and Sarah dug into those who had the misfortune of being mentored by Martin and some of his cronies, the more they encountered stories of young women who had been taken advantage of, sometimes abused, and more than occasionally had their lives shattered by their experiences at the hands of the men they'd worked for.

Nyles wondered how the two women had found out so much in just two days.

Cloris told him about a group she and Sarah had learned about that was militant about unearthing cases of abuse. "They call themselves *Women Fighting Back* and use the acronym, *WFB*. They're a mix of women who themselves were preyed upon while they were in politics—either as interns or fellows or sometimes lobbyists or civil servants—and women who have taken up their cause."

"So they've what... taken names of victims and perpetrators? Gone to the press?" Nyles hadn't heard of WFB before, but that didn't mean anything. The campaign against sexual abuse of women had been his wife's project, not his.

“They’re not forthcoming about all of their activities. We only found them on our second day in Sacramento. We heard things, heard hints about a group, then finally found a name and, it turned out, even a private house where they conducted their business.”

Nyles thought they sounded like some kind of underground or guerilla group. “And what is their business?” he asked her, trying to conceal his misgivings.

“From what we learned, they collect testimony from victims—detailed testimony—then they approach the perpetrator and present him with their evidence. They threaten to tell his family, his co-workers or his superiors unless the person makes amends in some way. Restitution of some sort.”

“You mean money?” He may have been correct in being skeptical about WFB. It sounded to him as if they were using blackmail or extortion as a means of retribution against those who had been accused of sexual predation.

She shook her head, ignoring his attitude, which he was no longer able to conceal. “They rarely ask for financial restitution. What they ask—demand actually—is that the person step down from his position, or make sure the injured party has a job, issue an apology, even a private one.”

He was surprised. “But they don’t go public?”

“Sometimes they do. But only if the victim wants that to happen.”

“So the rest they do in private. Are they a secret organization?”

Cloris again shook her head. “They don’t try to hide, they just don’t publicize themselves. Their files supposedly contain lots of accusations—and evidence—much of which

the victims don't want to make public. Even when they use their evidence privately to put pressure on the perpetrator, they ask each women for her permission first."

"It sounds like they're using blackmail," Nyles said. He understood why WFB did what they did, but it eliminated the chance of due process for the perpetrators and it might even be illegal.

Cloris leaned back and looked at him. He thought he detected a frown of disapproval on her face. "I thought you'd bring up the legal issue," she said. "But these women are doing the same thing to the men that those men did to the women... threatening their careers and private lives if they don't cooperate."

He wasn't sure if he agreed, but he wasn't going to argue. He was surprised that he felt some kind of primal male allegiance. He'd never thought of himself as sexist. He knew that such a feeling wasn't helpful in thinking about the situation his wife was describing. After all, his better sense told him that there was more than a little truth to what she was saying. "And Sarah wants to work with them? How about you?"

Cloris was pensive. "Sarah wants to see if they have records about Martin. She says she wants to find out who he harmed and try to make restitution herself, since he's no longer able to do it." She gazed at Nyles. "I want to help her... give her support."

"Do they have records on Martin? Are they willing to share them with her?"

"We don't know yet. They're suspicious because she's Martin's wife and they know his reputation. They're afraid she may have an ulterior motive, such as getting the victims to keep quiet or destroying the evidence in their files, if they have any, even though they admitted that no one was going to seek retribution from Martin now that he's dead. But these are very wary

people. There are a lot of powerful men in Sacramento who would like to shut them down, and anyone who wants access to their files is automatically suspect.”

Nyles wondered if he should worry about the two women. He’d been worrying about Cloris’ drinking when she and Sarah were together, but now they were trying to get involved with some fringe activist group that a lot of powerful people would probably like to silence. “So you’re waiting to find out if they’re going to let Sarah look at their files?”

“They want to talk to Sarah again. She wants to present her case to them. She’s very determined to try to make up for what Martin did... as much as she can.” She told him that she and Sarah were planning to return to Sacramento to talk to WFB. If Sarah could convince the group—and if they had files on Martin— then she’d find out who Martin’s victims were and try to find them.

“Is what you’re doing dangerous?” he asked his wife.

“Not compared to what you’re doing.” She smiled at him. “You’ve unearthed a murder. Someone is not going to like that.”

She was right. There had already been two attempts to intimidate him while he was driving... perhaps from two different people. He hadn’t told Cloris about either incident or she’d worry more than she already did. But she’d spent 40 years married to a cop. She knew how to handle worry about her husband’s safety.

“Do you think Sarah will still want to go back to Sacramento now that it’s clear that Martin was murdered?” he asked his wife.

Cloris gazed past him, as though she were thinking. “Unless she needs to be here to provide information or something. I think she’s in shock that someone killed Martin, but reading

his memoir seemed to focus her back on the issue of sexual predation in politics. She can't help catch her husband's murderer, but maybe she prevent others like him from using their power to prey on women. I think it will help to keep her mind off of what happened to Martin.”

Cloris was probably right, but Nyles realized he had been hoping that the news that Martin had been murdered might keep the women in Napa—with him. He was feeling lonely, but he was also still fearful of his wife being on her own without him. He gazed at her, sitting next to him on the sofa, her face calm and resolute, probably planning her and Sarah's next step in their campaign against male domination. He wondered if his own protectiveness of his wife was just the other side of the same sexist coin that led men to take advantage of women. He decided that the question was too complicated for him to ponder. Anyway, now he had a murder to solve.

Chapter 24

Cloris and Sarah had left for Sacramento and Phil MacDonald had assigned a detective full-time to Martin's murder case, taking over much of what Nyles had been doing. It sounded to Nyles as if the detective, an experienced and seemingly competent lieutenant named Rick Waters, whom Nyles had met briefly, was going to focus on Giuseppe Malta and his sons. Both Nyles' report of the continued bitterness of Malta toward Martin, and the fact that the memoir indicated that Martin had framed Malta when the former was the District Attorney, plus the discovery that the pickup truck that had tried to run Nyles off the road belonged to one of the Malta sons, made one or more of the Malta family prime suspects in Martin's death. Nyles had to agree. The fact that the autopsy indicated that Martin suffered a single, non-fatal blow to the head and that he had died later when exposed to toxic levels of smoke from the wildfire suggested to him that the murder probably wasn't planned. Perhaps one or more of the Maltas came to Martin's house, got into an altercation with him—God knows the whole Malta family were volatile personalities, and Martin was too—and struck him with the vase. Then Malta or his sons, thinking Martin was dead, dumped him in the fire area in order to make his death look accidental. It all made sense to him, but of course it was all conjecture. He'd let the Sheriff's Department look for the evidence. It wasn't his place to keep investigating once law enforcement took over. Besides, he thought, there were still other loose ends... loose ends that bothered him.

Although he was ready to believe that Malta or his sons might have killed Martin, that didn't explain the burglary of the Overman house. Giuseppe Malta would have had no knowledge of Martin's memoir or that it was on his computer. And, even though Phil MacDonald had identified the pickup truck that followed him as belonging to one of the Malta sons, Nyles was sure that the vehicle that had followed him and tried to run him off the road after

he'd talked to Shari Randall wasn't that same pickup, in fact it wasn't a pickup at all. He was on his way to talk to the secretary a second time.

"My employer doesn't want me to talk to you," Shari said, standing in her doorway and very obviously not inviting him in.

"Why wouldn't they want you to talk to me?" he asked. "And how do they even know who I am?"

"Ronnie said something to them—to Mr. Reynolds, the Wine Consortium president. Ronnie came to the office. I heard him yelling at Mr. Reynolds and Mr. Stalworth. He was blaming them for breaking into his mother's house."

So Ronnie's anger at the Wine Consortium was genuine, Nyles thought to himself. He hadn't been sure if Ronnie was really upset at them or was in collusion about the burglary, but it sounded as if he hadn't been involved.

"And he mentioned me?" Nyles asked.

"He said you thought his father had been murdered. He thought you blamed one of them."

"Martin Overman *was* murdered," Nyles told her. "The sheriff has reopened his case, but he doesn't think it was anyone from the Wine Consortium. The sheriff is focusing on someone else, but I'd like to talk to you."

Her face showed her shock, although she still looked at him uncertainly; but she finally opened the door for him to come in. She offered him a glass of wine, as she had before. She brought him a glass of red wine and sat down opposite him. He noticed that she had refilled her own half-full glass. She must have gotten off work early, because she was dressed in a pair of

jeans and what appeared to be a man's shirt, with the sleeves rolled. "It's not a very good wine," she said, "but it comes from one of our members' wineries and I get it half price." She looked embarrassed.

He remembered the expensive red that Ronnie had served him at Sarah's house and the Chardonnay that Howard Goode had served. Offering good wine was an important social gesture among wine country people, Nyles thought. "Don't worry, I really can't tell one wine from another," he told her, although he was starting to develop a palate for good wine and could tell that she was right; this wine lacked the robust flavor of the previous reds he'd tasted and had a definite acidic taste to it. "I understand that most of the wineries that belong to the Consortium produce less expensive wines," he said, looking to her for confirmation. He couldn't remember if he'd actually read that or if he'd deduced it from the fact that it was the cheaper wines that had been accused of containing too much arsenic, and if the Wine Consortium was the chief opponent of regulating their arsenic content, then that must be the kind of wine their members produced.

"Mostly," she nodded. His comment, which had nothing to do with Martin Overman, had relaxed her a little. . . or maybe it was the wine, he thought, although she'd obviously started drinking even before he'd arrived. "A few of the producers have some high-end products, but most of their wines sell for less than ten dollars a bottle. Mr. Baron, the head of our Executive Board has a goal of getting more people hooked on drinking wine by mass producing some low priced brands, but still with enough quality to attract those who have a taste for good wine. This one isn't too bad, for instance."

He wasn't sure he agreed with her about the wine, but he didn't say anything. "Mr. Baron is a wine grower, I take it?" he asked.

“He’s an owner. He’s not a traditional grower, really. He bought several wineries—sort of as an investment, from what Mr. Reynolds says—but he wants to make money from them... even though he’s already rich.”

“He’s already rich?”

She nodded and sipped her wine. “He’s a hedge fund manager.” She looked embarrassed. “I don’t really know what that is, except it made him a multimillionaire and that’s how he could afford to buy three wineries—well, four actually, since he has a small one in Mendocino County also.”

Baron sounded like the kind of person who might not be above bribing a politician in order to protect his investment. Nyles knew he was jumping to conclusions, but someone in the Wine Consortium had been responsible for bribing Martin Overman back in 2010. He wondered if Baron had been there at that time. “How long ago did Mr. Baron join the Wine Consortium?” he asked.

Shari shrugged. “ Oh, he started it. Back in the early two thousands, I think. He’s made it quite a powerful organization.” She looked around her living room, then took another sip of her wine. Nyles could tell that she was nervous. “Was this what you wanted to talk to me about?” she asked.

His thoughts about her involvement and that of the Wine Consortium were confused. He wasn’t sure exactly what bothered him, except that something was going on that had her, Ronnie Overman, and apparently someone she worked for at the Consortium, on edge. They didn’t want him poking around, but what was it they didn’t want him to find? Was it really the memoir and its information about the bribery? “I’m sort of in the same position Ronnie is,” he told her. “I

think that someone from where you work broke into the Overmans' house and tried to steal Martin's computer." He studied her face. He could see that his mention of the burglary had raised her anxiety. "Whoever committed the burglary had a key... and you and Ronnie were the only ones with extra keys."

Her anxiety had become panic. "I didn't give anyone my key," she said. Her eyes were wide with fear.

"So you still have yours?"

She shook her head. "I lost it... or maybe I gave it back. I can't remember." She was lying, and from the look on her face he could tell that she knew that he knew it.

"Sarah Overman says you didn't give it back. I'm sure you didn't lose it either."

She stared at the floor without answering. "I'm going to get another glass of wine," she said suddenly, jumping to her feet. She looked over at his glass, which was still nearly full. She walked into the kitchen—unsteadily, he thought—then returned with a full glass. He wondered how much she had had to drink before he'd arrived.

"Giving someone a key isn't a crime unless you knew they were going to use it to do something illegal," he told her.

She was still wide-eyed. "I swear I had no idea they were going to try to steal Mr. Overman's computer. They were afraid of the memoir, but I told them I could erase it for them. I could have asked Ronnie to erase it, since he was over at his mother's house constantly, and he was almost as afraid of the memoir as they were."

“And who are the *they*, you’re talking about?” he asked. He marveled that she had confessed so easily to giving away the key. Perhaps being tipsy, as she obviously was, had loosened her tongue.

“Mr. Reynolds, our President and Mr. Stalworth, our Director of Government Relations. I gave the key to Mr. Stalworth. He told me that Mr. Baron was the one who asked him to get the key.”

“The head of your Executive Board?”

“His name is Gerald Baron. I told you about him.”

“Did Mr. Stalworth say why Mr. Baron wanted him to take your key? Didn’t that seem a little odd to you?”

“He asked me all about the memoir and where it was. He and Mr. Reynolds already had copies of it. They said that what was in it was a lie, but it could do the Consortium damage if anyone read it. Then Mr. Stalworth asked me for the key.” She hung her head, not able to look Nyles in the face.

Nyles’ mind was working overtime. What she’d just told him meant that her bosses at the Wine Consortium were responsible for burglarizing Sarah and Martin Overman’s house. What else were they responsible for, he wondered. “Was this conversation after Martin died or before?”

She looked surprised. “After he died. I didn’t go to work for them until after Mr. Overman died.”

“But you told Ronnie Overman what his father was saying while Martin was still alive, wasn’t that right?”

She nodded, sipping her wine slowly and looking at him uncertainly, as if she was afraid of where his questions were leading.

“And you sent the Wine Consortium copies of the memoir. Was that before or after Martin died.”

“I didn’t send them to the Consortium,” she said. “I sent them to Ronnie and he sent them to the Consortium. I sent him copies of everything in the memoir... that’s why he wanted me to be the one who typed it.”

She was admitting more than she’d admitted earlier. The Wine Consortium knew that Martin had talked about the briberies before he had died. But Ronnie Overman had played a more important role in sharing that information than he had let on. In fact, Ronnie had been the one monitoring what his father was putting in the memoir. He wasn’t sure what it all meant, but he was going to dig deeper. He didn’t like unsolved mysteries. “Is there anything else you need to tell me?” he asked.

“Only that they knew you had come to talk to me,” she said, her look of fear returning. This time she gulped her wine. She’d almost finished her glass, and she glanced toward the kitchen as if in anticipation of the next glass “They asked me and I told them, but I know that they knew about it before they asked. They just wanted to see if I’d tell the truth.”

“Did you?”

“Not at first, but then they said that they knew you’d been here. They said Mrs. Doan, the Business Manager told them that I’d told her, but I hadn’t.”

Her employers knew he’d been to see her because they’d been sitting outside in a car when Nyles had visited before, waiting in a car that had tried to run him off the road after he’d

left her house. Nyles hadn't noticed a car outside tonight and he'd looked carefully. He'd have to take a close look when he left.

He thanked her for her honesty and left. He drove around the area, until he was convinced that there was not a suspicious vehicle waiting to follow him again. Then he headed back to Napa.

Chapter 25

Satisfied that he wasn't being followed, Nyles decided to drive into downtown Napa and find somewhere to eat dinner. Cloris and Sarah would be gone for several days and he didn't enjoy the idea of either going grocery shopping or eating nothing but fast foods until they returned. Maybe he'd shop later and pick up something he could cook at Sarah's house, but tonight he felt like a steak. He might even try pairing a red wine with it—a better one than he'd had at Shari Randall's house— although he'd have to take the waiter's recommendation, given his neophyte status as a wine connoisseur.

The Wine Country Bar and Grill, just off main street, which he picked only because it advertised steaks on the sign in its window, was more of a bar than a grill and was crowded. He debated going somewhere quieter, but then he saw a couple of people eating thick steaks and he noticed that one whole wall was a giant wine rack with hundreds of bottles invitingly poking out of it, so he decided he would stay. On the television behind the bar was a Warriors game, reminding him that he was no longer in Lakers or Clippers country.

He felt embarrassed asking a bartender for a wine recommendation, but luckily the wine menu was separate from the dinner menu and it contained a brief description of each of the wines on its several pages. He chose a Cabernet Sauvignon that was mid-priced, although it was from a winery with which he wasn't familiar. The choice of steak was easy and he picked the 10 oz filet mignon with French fries and a dinner salad. When the wine arrived, he took a long sip and tried to discover the “plum and dark cherries” flavor, which the menu had mentioned, while he marveled at the softness of the wine on his palate. He leaned back and relaxed, trying to decide if he could become a Golden State Warriors fan for just one night. He rejected the idea, but he did think he could become a fan of Cabernet Sauvignon.

“What do you know? If it isn’t Martin Overman’s friend,” a voice behind him growled. He recognized the sarcastic tone of Frank Malta, Giuseppe’s older son. He turned around to face two men, one of whom he recognized as Frank and the other, slightly smaller and younger, whom he guessed must be the younger brother, Danny Malta—the driver of the pickup truck that had tried to run him off the road.

“This is the guy who put the cops on us?” the younger Malta asked, staring at Nyles when he talked. “The one who wants to put the old man back in jail?”

Nyles guessed that the Malta family had been visited by Detective Lieutenant Waters from the Napa Sheriff’s Department. Following Nyles’ visit with him, Giuseppe Malta must have put two and two together and come to the conclusion that Nyles was the one who’d informed the Sheriff’s Department of his threats against Martin Overman. The two brothers clearly blamed him for the fact that they and their father were now being investigated.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Nyles said calmly. Their belligerence was an irritation, but he’d had years of experience confronting more dangerous people than either of these two. He didn’t welcome their intrusion into his dinner, but perhaps they might say something that provided him more information about their role in Martin Overman’s death... if they had a role.

“You accused my father of killing Martin Overman,” the older brother, Frank said, sticking out his chin belligerently. “I was there, remember?”

Nyles looked the older brother in the eyes. “I remember. Your father told you to leave the room. He told me you needed to learn some manners, although it doesn’t look as though you have. Did you have something you wanted to tell me about Martin Overman’s murder?”

The older Malta's face was red with anger, but he only stood there, clenching his fists. The bartender had come over and was standing behind Nyles, as if waiting to see if there was going to be trouble.

"I'm telling you to lay off my father. He's done his time and he had nothing to do with Senator Overman's death... except to celebrate it, along with a lot of other people."

Nyles picked up his wine glass then turned back to the Malta brothers. "The police will do their own investigating. Whomever they end up suspecting will be someone their evidence leads them to, not my opinions." He took what he hoped appeared to be a casual sip of his wine. "Now I'm going to eat my dinner and you two can go bother someone else." He wasn't going to tell them anything he knew about the case, because it could only harm the sheriff's investigation.

"Are we bothering *you*?" Frank asked, staring at him. He looked at his younger brother. "Maybe we should show this asshole what happens when you mess around with the Malta family." He edged closer to Nyles and his brother nodded his head, licking his lips as if he couldn't wait to do something more aggressive than just talking.

"Let's show him how we really bother someone," the younger brother said.

Nyles looked squarely at the younger brother. "You've already shown me how you can try to run someone off the road. The sheriff's department identified your truck by the license number that I wrote down. If the sheriff is investigating you, as you say he is, it might not be a good idea to compound your misdeeds by getting arrested for assaulting someone," Nyles said. He swung his gaze back and forth between the two brothers.

The older brother swallowed. A momentary look of fear had crossed his face. "You've got friends in the sheriff's department," he said, "...and that makes you a lucky person, Mister."

He turned to his younger brother. “Let’s get out of here. I don’t want to eat in some place that serves this a-hole.” The two of them turned and left the restaurant.

Nyles breathed a sigh. He hadn’t expected that the confrontation would turn physical, but nevertheless he felt himself relax now that the two brothers had left the restaurant. He doubted they would bother him on the road back to Sarah’s house. His warning to them about not doing anything to make them look more like suspects was probably sufficient to keep them away. He decided to enjoy his steak and order one more glass of wine.

The drive back to Sarah’s house was uneventful and Nyles was more worried about the two glasses of wine he’d drunk affecting his ability to navigate roads that were still mostly unfamiliar to him, especially at night, than about anyone trying to run him off the road, particularly either of the Malta brothers. His experience feeling lost when he’d driven back to the Overmans’ house before was still in the back of his mind.

It was still only 9:00 pm and he had time to call Cloris to see how her and Sarah’s day in Sacramento had gone. Before he had a chance to make the call, his cell phone buzzed. It was Sheriff Phil MacDonald. “Shari Randall, Martin’s former secretary, died tonight,” he said.

Nyles was stunned. He felt a stab of grief, picturing the young woman in his mind. It had only been a couple of hours since he’d talked to her. “What happened?” he asked.

MacDonald told him that the young secretary had apparently run off the road. She had died in a single-car accident on the stretch of road that led from her house in Sonoma to the office of the Wine Consortium where she worked. There was no evidence of another car being involved and the examining officers suspected that she had been drinking, since another driver,

whom she had passed only five minutes earlier, had stopped at the scene of the accident and told them that she was driving erratically when she passed him at high speed. Nyles remembered the wine she had been drinking during their talk and how he'd thought she looked tipsy. He thought about his own ability to drive on the way home from the restaurant after only two glasses of wine. Shari had been drinking when he'd arrived at her house, he wondered how many more glasses of wine she'd had after he'd left her. But why would she have been returning to work?

Nyles thanked the sheriff for informing him. He told him about his encounter with the two Malta brothers at the restaurant. "So they weren't involved, because they were busy bothering me," he told MacDonald.

"Why would you think anyone else was involved?" the sheriff asked. Nyles could hear the surprise in his voice. "It looks like a simple case of drunk driving and she lost control of her car. We'll know more when they check her blood alcohol level, but there's no reason to think that this is more than that."

Nyles didn't want to argue, but when he got off the phone he thought about what had happened. Shari had been drinking, and was probably even drunk, he knew that, but she also drove that same road every day going to work, so it wasn't unfamiliar to her. Why would she go back to her office at night? Had someone called her? Was there some piece of evidence she was returning to look for? He thought about the key that she had apparently given one of her bosses, and Sarah's computer, which had been stolen. He also thought about the car that had tried to run him off the road after his first visit to the secretary's house. If someone tried to run her off the road, just as they had him, even just to scare her, she might have crashed if she was inebriated. He was letting his imagination run wild and he knew it, but he couldn't bring himself to dismiss Shari Randall's death as an accident—an accident that his visit to her house might have

provoked. The thought that he was causing more harm than good by continuing to investigate on his own returned. He hated how he always blamed himself, but this time he couldn't put such thoughts out of his mind. But would someone really want to kill the young secretary just for speaking to him? Perhaps they'd just wanted to scare her and not realized how drunk she was. Either way, his guilt didn't just make him feel bad, it made him want to find out the truth. Now he had a second death, besides Martin Overman's, to look into. And he needed to call his wife.

Chapter 26

Nyles debated whether to tell Cloris and Sarah about Shari Randall's death. Sarah would become even more frightened than she had been when Sheriff MacDonald had declared Martin's death a murder. Of course, Phil MacDonald considered the secretary's death an accident, even though Nyles wasn't sure that it was. There was no reason to raise Sarah's anxiety by confiding his suspicions when that was all they were: suspicions. Cloris would also be worried, since she knew that her husband could not leave a question about whether a death was an accident or a homicide dangling in the air, regardless of what the Sheriff's Department did. He decided to wait until they returned to tell them about Shari.

Cloris told him that *Women Fighting Back* had files on Martin and that Sarah had finally convinced them to share their files with her. Sarah had reacted with both depression and guilt to what she learned about her husband. Cloris was trying to get her not to blame herself for Martin's transgressions, but Sarah felt that if she had been more aware of what her husband was doing—if she had not left him alone in Sacramento and stuck her head in the sand about behaviors in which she knew he engaged—she might have protected some of the young women. Knowing Martin, Nyles doubted very much if Sarah could have curtailed her husband's womanizing, but he also knew how easy it was to assume guilt for something, even if you weren't directly involved.

Cloris and Sarah were now setting out to find some of the women mentioned in the WFB files on Martin. Most were still in Sacramento, but a few had left. Cloris anticipated that they would return home in two or three days. That was fine with Nyles, who felt freer following up on Shari Randall's death without having to explain his actions to his wife and to Sarah. He was tempted to ask Cloris about her drinking, but, with difficulty, he resisted, feeling as if it would

send a message about his lack of trust in her. Anyway, he needed to stop letting his anxiety cause him to be overprotective of his wife. He was aware that his own drinking sometimes strayed beyond the bounds of moderation and it made him feel hypocritical asking Cloris about hers. He told her that Sheriff MacDonald was pursuing the Malta family as a likely suspect in Martin's death and that he was letting the sheriff's department handle it. He didn't mention that he was still poking around the Wine Consortium's role or their part in the burglary.

When he hung up he thought about what to do next. He could either visit the Wine Consortium and try to determine if there was anything he could find out by talking to anyone there, or he could talk to Ronnie Overman, whose role in giving his father's memoir to the Wine Consortium had been bigger than he'd let on. Nyles wondered how the young man would react to the death of his former girlfriend. Would he, like Nyles, be suspicious that it might not be an accident? He decided that he would be better able to question Shari Randall's employers if he found out first what Ronnie knew—or suspected—about them.

After he woke up the next morning and had his first cup of coffee, Nyles called Ronnie Overman. Ronnie was at home. Someone from the Wine Consortium had apparently called Ronnie and told him about Shari Randall's death, and he had stayed home from work that day because he was, in his own words, "devastated." Nyles asked if he could visit, and Ronnie—reluctantly, Nyles thought—acquiesced.

It was the first time Nyles had ever visited Ronnie's house and he was surprised to find that to get there, he took the same route he would have taken—and Shari had taken the night before—to get to the Wine Consortium offices. Perhaps she had not been heading back to work, but instead to Ronnie Overman's house. Nyles had even more questions to ask the young man than he'd originally thought.

The usually impeccably dressed Ronnie answered his door in pajamas and a bathrobe. His hair was uncombed and he hadn't shaved. His bleary eyes made Nyles think he'd been drinking. He let Nyles in without saying a word.

“Drink?” Ronnie asked. “Beer, wine, something stronger?”

Nyles had taken a chair in the living room, a large room filled with modern looking furniture and with a wide picture window looking out a vast vineyard, apparently belonging to a winery whose main buildings were not in view. He declined the offer of a drink. It was only ten in the morning. Ronnie took a half-full glass of what appeared to be whiskey from the kitchen counter and sat down on the couch opposite him.

“Is this a reaction to Shari's death?” Nyles asked.

“What, my drinking? That I'm still in my pajamas?” Ronnie took a sip of his whiskey and set the glass down on small table at the end of the couch. “She called me last night—after you'd left her house—and said she needed to talk. She was headed here when she died.”

His statement answered one question for Nyles. Shari wasn't going back to the Wine Consortium offices last night; she was coming to see Ronnie. “What did she want to talk about?” he asked.

Ronnie took another sip of his whiskey. He looked at Nyles with narrowed eyes, as if he was trying to decide whether he could trust him. He took another sip. “She was a little muddled. I think she was drunk. She said she wanted me to help her get back her key to my parents' house from David Stalworth at the Wine Consortium.”

“Did you know she'd given him her key?”

Ronnie nodded, then hung his head, looking at the floor. “After you and I talked about the burglary, and that whoever did it had a key, I asked her about it. I knew I hadn’t given anyone my key. She told me that she’d given hers to Stalworth.”

“She told me the same thing,” Nyles said.

Ronnie looked surprised. “Really? I thought she was afraid you’d find out and tell the sheriff.”

Nyles shook his head. “She’d already told me. Why did she say she wanted it back?”

“She said she was afraid the police would connect her to the burglary. Maybe she thought you’d tell them.”

Nyles realized that, just as with the Malta family, his questions to Shari had made her afraid that he was passing everything he learned on to the police or the sheriff. He wondered who else had the same fear—and if that fear was enough for someone to want her dead. “How would you have been able to help her get her key back?”

Ronnie shook his head. “I have no idea. Like I said, she sounded muddled in her thinking. She was also afraid that her house was being watched. She said she was coming over to stay at my place so she’d feel safe. I told her to come over.” He leaned forward, his head cradled in his hands. “I shouldn’t have told her to come. I should have known she was too drunk to drive.”

“So you think her death was an accident? She just drove off the road because she was too drunk to drive?”

Ronnie looked at Nyles, a surprised look on his face. “Don’t you?”

Did he? Nyles wasn’t sure. “I don’t know,” he answered. “Did she say why she thought someone was watching her house or who she thought it was?”

Ronnie was staring at him. He no longer looked bleary-eyed. “She said that a little while after you left, a car came by and parked at the end of her street. She was watching out the window because she was nervous that someone might know you’d visited her. I think she thought it was one of her bosses.”

Had his visit been what triggered someone wanting to kill Shari? He felt a return of his guilt. He’d worried that his visit to her might put *him* in danger, but it sounded as if *she* had become the target. “Someone tried to run me off the road the first time I visited her house. They could have done the same to her last night.”

Ronnie’s eyes were clear now. “She was drunk. It wouldn’t have taken much to make her drive off the road. Do you think someone wanted to kill her?”

“Maybe just scare her,” Nyles answered. “But, as you said, she was too drunk to even be driving, so she might have run off the road trying to get away.” He was pretty sure he was talking about someone from the Wine Consortium. “Tell me about the Wine Consortium people—this David Stalworth, and the president, I forgot his name, and Gerald Baron. Shari mentioned Baron as the one who asked Stalworth to take her key.”

Ronnie’s face looked angry. “Baron is a creep. So is Stalworth. George Reynolds, the president, is just a yes man, but I wouldn’t put anything past those other two.”

“Who was involved with the bribe to your father?”

Ronnie looked embarrassed. “Baron and Stalworth. I’m sure Reynolds knew about it, but they were the ones who arranged everything, including the fake property transactions. Stalworth was their man in Sacramento. It was his job to get my father to oppose the legislation.”

“But the bribe was your father’s idea.” Nyles reminded him.

“He demanded they pay him. But they didn’t even blink an eye. Baron made it clear that he considered bribes a normal part of doing business.”

“Is either Baron or Stalworth capable of murder?”

“Do you mean of Shari?” Ronnie’s expression had become angry. “If those bastards...

“Or your father,” Nyles interrupted him.

Ronnie’s eyes widened. “You think my father was murdered?”

Nyles hadn’t realized that Ronnie didn’t know that his father’s death was no longer considered an accident. His mother must not have told him. “Sheriff MacDonald has declared his death a homicide. MacDonald thinks Giuseppe Malta or his sons are suspects, but I’m not sure if he’s right. How far do you think Baron or Stalworth would go?”

Ronnie had become fully alert. The news that his father’s death was now being treated as a murder had sobered him. “Stalworth would do anything to save his own skin. Gerald Baron? He’d do anything to make an extra buck, much less save himself from being prosecuted.” Ronnie stopped himself, his expression becoming wary. “Who else does the sheriff suspect?”

“I don’t know. There are plenty of suspects out there besides Malta. That memoir was a loaded gun... a lot of people didn’t want it to come out.”

“But I thought you said no one was going to be prosecuted for what happened back then. You told me *I* had nothing to fear.” Ronnie’s own fear seemed to have become provoked by Nyles’ statement.

“No one has anything to fear, except maybe bad publicity if your father’s memoir were published, but that would never have happened anyway. I’m not sure that either Baron or Stalworth knew that, though.”

“Are you going to the sheriff with your suspicions?” Ronnie asked.

Nyles shook his head. “I don’t know enough yet. It’s all conjecture. Phil MacDonald is convinced that Shari’s death was an accident, and he’s still investigating Malta for your father’s murder. I want to talk to some of the people at the Wine Consortium... especially Gerald Baron and David Stalworth.”

Ronnie stared at the floor, as if his mind was miles away. “If either of those two killed Shari, they’re going to pay for it.” He snapped his head up, an embarrassed look on his face. “I mean, of course, that they’ll be caught and punished.” His expression became serious. “But your poking around seems to cause problems, don’t you think? Look what happened to Shari.”

His words struck a nerve. Nyles couldn’t shake the feeling that his talk with Shari Randall had been the cause of her death... or at least had contributed to it. “So you think I should just leave things be?” He tried to gauge whether Sarah’s son was blaming him or warning him.

“Aren’t you worried that looking for a murderer on your own could be dangerous?”

Nyles was pretty sure that this time he heard a warning in Ronnie’s tone. He looked him squarely in the eyes. “I’m not worried. I used to be a cop, remember?”

Chapter 27

There were only two cars in the parking lot of the Wine Consortium offices, which was in a small, two-story wooden building that looked as if it might once have been a farmhouse, but had been remodeled and painted a sedate-looking gray with rust-colored trim to give it a more businesslike appearance. It was just off the main road and there were no other houses or buildings immediately adjacent to it, adding to the suggestion that it had once been a home in the center of farm acreage. Nyles didn't recognize either of the cars as being the one that had tried to run him off the road, but then he'd not gotten a good look and it had been dark.

The lobby looked as if it had been the former parlor of the residence. Two open doors led into small rooms in each of which he could see a woman sitting behind a desk. A single desk in the lobby, where a receptionist would sit, was empty. He wondered if it was Shari Randall's desk. A diminutive, stocky Asian woman came out from one of the rooms. She wore a knee-length skirt and a white blouse. Her hair was cut short and brushed forward around her face. Her eyes were red, as if she'd been crying. "Can I help you?" the woman asked.

"I'm a friend of Shari Randall's and of her former employer, Senator Overman," Nyles said.

The woman's face showed her surprise, then her lower lip trembled and she began to cry. "I'm sorry," she said, wiping her eyes with a handkerchief she'd apparently had ready for just such an occasion. "We heard about Shari when we came in this morning. We're devastated."

Nyles believed the woman, given her reaction. He noticed that the woman in the other office had looked up and was staring at him with suspicion. She got up and walked to her door. She was a heftily built woman with a straight skirt that came well below her knees. She wore a

dark sweater on top and her gray hair was cut shoulder length. She wore glasses and looked at Nyles, frowning. "I'll handle this Sylvia," she told the other woman, who nodded and hung her head, dabbing at her eyes. "Are you with the sheriff's office?"

"I'm just a friend," Nyles answered. "Are either Mr. Reynolds or Mr. Stalworth in?"

The woman looked alarmed. "What is your business with them?" Her voice wasn't friendly

"I'd prefer to tell them in person," he answered. "You are...?"

"Norma Doan," the woman answered. "And this is Sylvia Lu. We both worked closely with Shari. I'm sure we can answer any questions you might have. Can you tell me your name?"

"Nyles Monahan."

A look of recognition flickered across Norma Doan's face. "I'm afraid neither of the people you wish to see are in today," she said, a look of triumph on her face.

Nyles was unsure whether to believe her. He wasn't sure of her role or how much she knew about her bosses' activities with regard to the memoir Shari had typed for Martin Overman. "When will one of them be back?" he asked the woman.

"They're all in San Francisco for a Wine Consortium function. They won't return until the end of the week," she answered unsmiling. "Is there something I can help you with? I'm the business manager."

"What kind of function?" Nyles asked. He still wasn't sure whether to believe the woman.

“We’re putting on a gala—a wine tasting with entertainment—where we’re letting the press and others know that Napa is still functioning after the fires. We’re introducing a few new wines from some of our members.”

“And Mr. Baron, Mr. Stalworth and Mr. Reynolds are all there?”

“Mr. Baron is not normally here, anyway. He is the head of our Executive Board, not an employee. The others, including Mr. Patton, our Public Relations Manager, are all there. Mr. Patton organized the event.” She looked him in the eyes. “So you see, no one is here for you to talk to.” Her self-satisfied smile was devoid of any warmth.

He was willing to bet that she knew something, but if he really wanted to find out what was going on she wasn’t the one he needed to talk to. He might just have to go to San Francisco. But first he needed to talk to Phil MacDonald.

“Both Frank and Danny Malta were on the fire line the morning Martin died, fighting fires near their homes. They both have multiple witnesses.” Phil MacDonald leaned back in his chair and then slipped a candy in his mouth. Nyles could read the disappointment on the sheriff’s face.

“What about their father?”

MacDonald shrugged. “He says he was home. His wife isn’t alive, so he has no witnesses. Do you think he could have moved Martin’s body by himself? How would he have gotten back home if he drove Martin’s car to where the body was left?”

MacDonald was right. Giuseppe was old and small. He had the aggressive energy of a fighting cock, but Nyles doubted if the old man could have moved the body by himself or that he

would have walked back to his house—or to Martin’s house, since his car would have been left there. “Maybe he used someone else to help him?”

“And left his sons out of it? The Maltas do things as a family. Those two boys hated Overman as much as their father did.”

Nyles felt the same disappointment he had seen on his friend’s face. Giuseppe Malta and his sons had the greatest reason for killing Martin: revenge for having put the old man in prison for twenty years for a crime he probably hadn’t committed. But having a reason didn’t mean they’d done it. That left the people at the Napa Valley Wine Consortium. But was Martin’s memoir a reason to kill him, especially when they already had a copy? And if so, why had they burglarized the house later—if that was who, in fact, committed the burglary? If they wanted to take the memoir, why not take it when they’d killed Martin? Then there was Ronnie. Could he and his father have argued? Ronnie could have easily taken the memoir without killing his father; in fact Shari Randall had given him the copy that he gave to the Wine Consortium. On the other hand, Ronnie had already admitted that he’d had to control his father on several occasions when Martin had become violent. Perhaps things had gotten out of hand.

He knew he was going in circles. “Are we back to square one?” he asked the sheriff.

MacDonald looked across his desk at him, raising his eyebrows. “I am, but how about you? Any ideas?”

Nyles was hoping he wouldn’t have to reveal everything he’d learned about the Napa Valley Wine Consortium people. He preferred to be free to do his own investigating before involving law enforcement, an action that would certainly cause Gerald Baron and David Stalworth to run for cover. But he wasn’t about to conceal evidence and there were some things

the sheriff's department could do that might help. "I'm not sure that Shari Randall's auto accident isn't related in some way to Martin's death. I haven't figured it all out yet, but maybe your people can go over everything one more time—check for any evidence that her car might have been hit by someone else, or look for tire tracks indicating she might have been pushed off the road."

MacDonald frowned. "We can look again, but so far we've found nothing. Her blood alcohol was over the top." He narrowed his eyes. "What are you not telling me?"

"I talked to Ronnie Overman. He said that Shari Randall was headed toward his house last night. I'd visited her myself earlier in the evening. She told Ronnie that she thought someone was watching her house after I left."

MacDonald glared at him. "You didn't tell me this before."

"I just talked to Ronnie this morning—right before I came here. I'm telling you now."

"So who would care if she was talking to you? Who might want to harm her?"

He didn't want to involve the sheriff too much, but he wasn't going to lie to his old friend. "She told me that her bosses at the Wine Consortium warned her about talking to me. She also said that she gave one of them her key to the Overman house."

MacDonald's eyes widened. "So that's who burgled it?"

"That's my theory. They were after Martin's computer and the memoir that he was writing that talked about their bribes to him."

MacDonald looked embarrassed. "Those bribery charges are a dead issue."

"Maybe legally, but they'd still make a juicy story if they came out."

The sheriff looked like he was weighing things in his head. “The Napa police didn’t find any strange prints in the Overmans’ house, so there’s no evidence tying anyone else directly to the crime. Do you think whoever the secretary gave the key to still has it?”

“Not if they’ve got any good sense they don’t. But if they tried to scare me and they were trying to scare Shari Randall, they’re panicked. They may not be acting with good sense.”

“But why *kill* Martin? He had Alzheimer’s. No one was going to take anything he said seriously.”

Nyles shrugged. “You asked me what I thought. All I’ve got are bits and pieces of suggestions... nothing more. Shari’s bosses were worried about the memoir, she told me that much. Now she’s dead. That’s all I know for sure.”

MacDonald shook his head. “It’s not enough for me to build a case. I’ll have my people go over her car one more time, but so far all we’ve got is one unexplained murder, a robbery and an auto accident. Whether any of them have anything to do with each other is a mystery for right now.”

Exactly, Nyles thought. A mystery that he couldn’t resist trying to solve. He could just leave things to Phil MacDonald. After all, he’d fulfilled Sarah’s request by getting MacDonald to reopen Martin’s case., but he was having fun. He also had almost stopped worrying about his own mental faculties and his wife’s drinking. “I’ll keep looking,” he told the sheriff.

“Be careful,” MacDonald said.

That was the second person who’d warned him today.

Chapter 28

The grand ballroom at San Francisco's Hyatt Regency was filled with milling people. In booths along the walls and at circular stations set up in the middle of the room, various wineries displayed their products, providing four-ounce pours in plastic goblets to waiting lines of customers. Tables with samples of cheese, bread, and chocolates were set up at various locations in the room and hundreds of small tables allowed the visitors to sit and enjoy their wine and snacks.

Nyles was surprised at the modest price of thirty dollars to gain entry to the Napa Valley Wine Consortium's "Napa is Back" event. One price covered an unlimited number of tastings and whatever cheese, chocolate or bread one wanted to sample from the crowded tables. The program told him that Gerald Baron was scheduled to speak at 9:00 pm. The map of the winery booths also informed him that there was a VIP room off of the main ballroom, presumably where more influential attendees than he, such as store and restaurant buyers, were entertained. It was only 7:30 and he hadn't eaten since noon, so he decided to fill up on wine and cheese while he formulated his plan to confront Gerald Baron and David Stalworth.

Nyles preferred red wines and sharp, pungent cheeses. Red wine was in abundance as were cheeses from all over the world, although they were sliced into miniscule pieces, hardly enough to satisfy his hunger. The bread was offered in more generous portions and he filled up his plate as he settled in at a table with a glass of Merlot and surveyed the room. He was joined by a young couple, both of them drinking red wine and obviously happy to be at the event. They introduced themselves as Karen and Roy Halperin from Seattle, who were visiting San Francisco for the first time and staying at the Hyatt. They'd stumbled upon the wine gala when they'd seen a sign advertising it in the lobby and they felt extremely lucky.

“We were thinking of visiting Napa, but maybe we won’t need to, now that Napa has come to us, right here in our hotel,” Karen said, her eyes bright with excitement as she sipped on her wine and then looked over at her husband with a tender gaze.

“I’d prefer visiting some breweries,” her husband said, smiling at Nyles, “but Karen likes wine.”

“We’ve got plenty of breweries in Seattle,” Karen answered. “This is California. It’s wine country.”

Both of them paused, waiting for Nyles to say something in response to their enthusiastic and friendly conversation. He wasn’t good with small talk but the wine had loosened his tongue. He told them he had driven down from Napa just that day, where he was visiting from Los Angeles. He explained that the Wine Consortium wanted to show people that the recent fires hadn’t hampered wine production.

“Is there a lot of burned area in Napa?” Roy asked.

Nyles told them that there was a lot of devastation from the fires, but that most of the vineyards were intact. They asked him why he had come to San Francisco to a wine tasting event if he was staying in Napa. He said that he was here on business and was staying overnight at the Hyatt and couldn’t resist the low-priced wine and food, then he excused himself, asking them to save his place at the table and went back for more wine. He decided he would try one of Gerald Baron’s companies, three of which were represented. He picked a Cabernet Sauvignon and asked for two so he wouldn’t have to return too quickly. After the first sip, while walking back to his table, he realized that it was the same wine that Shari Randall had served him at her house, the

night she had died. The thought made him sad, but his sadness quickly turned to anger as he looked around the room and thought about the people who were putting on the event.

Roy and Karen had been patiently waiting for his return, saving his chair for him, although as soon as he sat down, they excused themselves and said they wanted to wander around and try more wines. Nyles felt relieved. He'd felt the burden of keeping up his end of the conversation and he hadn't wanted to have to make up a story if they asked him more questions about his business. He finished one of the small glasses of wine and realized that he was still hungry, so, leaving his coat hanging on the back of the chair, he visited one of the cheese tables and on the way back picked up two more samples of wine—another Cabernet and a Pinot Noir, this time from another winery. When he arrived at his table, he felt self-conscious with three glasses of wine in front of him, so he gulped the lighter Pinot Noir down as fast as he could and slid the glass over in front of one of the other chairs. Then he relaxed with his small treasures of Cabernet and Gruyère cheese.

After another plate of cheese and two more glasses of red wine, Nyles realized that sitting drinking wine and hoping to run into either Baron or Stalworth, neither of which he would probably recognize, was going to get him drunk but probably not result in him meeting the men he was there to confront. He'd been watching the entrance to the VIP room, which was connected to the main ballroom by an open door, which had a velvet chain across it and was guarded by a uniformed hotel employee who appeared to be checking invitations as he allowed people to enter.

Nyles got up from his table and visited another winery's display, requesting two more glasses of red wine and, as he had before, explaining that one was for a companion. He set the two glasses on the edge of the table nearest the entrance to the VIP room then, when he could see

no one looking, nudged the table, spilling both glasses onto the floor. Only a few guests noticed, but Nyles walked over to the guard at the VIP room door and, in the authoritarian voice he'd had to use sometimes as a detective, demanded that the man clean up the "dangerous spill on the floor before someone is hurt and sues the hotel." The man looked irritated but left his post to inspect the mess and Nyles slipped under the velvet chain and into the room.

He felt light headed from the numerous samples of wine he'd drunk, but not enough to impair his ability to carry out his plan. Everyone but he wore a name tag identifying either the winery, the restaurant or the distributor he or she represented. Nyles picked up another small glass of red wine and began circulating, looking for someone bearing a name tag with the name of the Wine Consortium on it.

Tom Patton, wearing a Wine Consortium name tag, was in a small circle of people, extolling the qualities of the low and moderately priced wines produced by the members of the consortium and Gerald Baron's plan to use such wines to introduce a much larger segment of the population, particularly young people, to wine drinking. He was a short man in his mid-forties, with thinning blonde hair, bright red cheeks, and what appeared to be a perpetual smile on his face. Nyles remembered that he was the Public Relations Manager for the Wine Consortium and it was he who had organized tonight's event. When he finished talking and people began to drift away, Nyles asked him if David Stalworth was present.

Patton stared at Nyles' breast, which was conspicuously absent a name tag and then pointed out a short-stocky man, partially bald, who was involved in an intense conversation with two other men. Nyles thanked him and exchanged his glass of wine for a fresh one while he waited patiently for Stalworth to finish his conversation with the other two men.

Nyles felt more than a little dizzy and was having some trouble walking straight as he approached Stalworth, who looked as if he was about to join another group of men and women who were talking in the middle of the room. Nyles grabbed him by the arm.

Stalworth turned, looking startled and more than a little irritated. “What?” he asked, staring intently at Nyles’ face.

“I’m here to talk to you,” Nyles said, realizing that he was having a hard time speaking. His tongue seemed to have grown abnormally large and unwieldy.

“Have we met?” Stalworth asked, trying his best to put his irritation aside and manage a friendly smile.

“Not directly,” Nyles answered. “I’m a friend of Shari Randall... and of Martin Overman.” He focused on Stalworth’s face, which had lost its friendly expression. “Shari told me she’d given you the key to Senator Overman’s house.”

Stalworth stepped back. “You must be that detective... Monahan, isn’t it?” His eyes were narrowed in anger. “How did you get in here?”

“As I said, I needed to talk to you. Why did you want the key to Overman’s house?”

Stalworth looked around, as if searching for a means to escape. “I have no idea what you’re talking about and you sound like you’re drunk.” He glanced over at the hotel attendant at the door.

“Someone with a key robbed Overman’s house,” Nyles said. “Was that you?” He realized that this wasn’t going the way he’d planned. He was blurting out information that he’d meant to keep to himself, but standing in front of David Stalworth and thinking that this might be

the man who was responsible for Shari Randall's death made him angry. "And what about running Shari off the road?" he asked. "Was that you, too?"

Stalworth's eyes had finally fastened on a large man in a dark suit standing in one corner of the room. He signaled him to come over. "Eric, I think we have an intruder into our VIP event," he told the man, who had a crew-cut of gray hair and, although he appeared to be near fifty years old, had obviously thick arms under his suit coat. "Would you mind escorting him out?"

Nyles had had enough to drink that he thought about resisting, but he wasn't so drunk as to follow his inclination, so he held up his hands in submission. "No need to escort me, Eric. I'll show myself out." He walked, a little unsteadily, toward the door and out into the main ballroom.

As soon as he found an empty table Nyles sat down. He had acted stupidly, he thought to himself. He had had too much wine. But his confrontation of Stalworth had nevertheless done what he'd intended. Nyles had given the man notice that he was aware of what he had done. Nyles had already figured out that either Stalworth or Gerald Baron, or both, were prone to impulsive actions, and the pressure his questions would engender—as poorly put as they were—might push them into more impulsive moves, moves which could lead Nyles or Phil MacDonald into obtaining evidence of their part in Shari Randall's death and perhaps Martin Overman's also. The more he thought about it, the better Nyles felt.

It was time for Gerald Baron's speech to the large crowd in the main ballroom. People had stopped milling and had turned to the stage at one end of the room. A tall man, who looked to be about fifty years old, with dark hair, graying at the temples and a deep tan, dressed in an elegant suit and wearing an ascot at his neck, as if he were European royalty, strode to the podium. He welcomed the crowd and began talking about the recovery of California's wine

country from the fires that had devastated it only weeks before. He extolled the new wines—all moderately priced—that were being produced by the members of the Napa Valley Wine Consortium and made a promise to the crowd that the price of any of the consortium’s wines would not rise as a result of the fires. Nyles was tempted to stand up and ask if the arsenic content of the new wines was going to be as high as the older ones, but instead he sat and listened for another five minutes before leaving. At least he now knew exactly who Gerald Baron and David Stalworth were.

As he left the ballroom, Eric, the large man who had threatened to escort him from the VIP room fell into step alongside him.

“I’m just making sure you’re really leaving,” Eric said. He looked down on Nyles with a scowl on his face. “You’re lucky we didn’t have you arrested for breaking into the VIP event.”

Nyles had sobered a little and he wasn’t in any mood to take abuse from a goon like Eric. “I’m staying at this hotel and you’re lucky I haven’t asked to have you arrested for harassing me,” he said. “If you’re still here when I get to the main lobby, I *will* ask to have you arrested.”

“Fuck you,” Eric answered, but he stopped walking, turned around and headed back to the ballroom.

End of Part 2

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