

# Fire and Wine

By Casey Dorman

## Part 3 (Conclusion)

Chapters 29-42

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## Chapter 29

Cloris was supposed to be back with Sarah by this evening. Nyles had just crossed the Golden Gate Bridge and was on his way back to Napa after eating a hearty breakfast in the Hyatt restaurant and drinking several cups of coffee along with a handful of aspirins in an attempt to get rid of his hangover. He wondered how he was going to talk to Cloris about her drinking after his own excesses of the night before. Even more pressing, though, was to find out more about Eric, whose last name he didn't even know. He wondered if the man was a regular employee of the Wine Consortium or just extra muscle hired for last night's event. The presence of a thug like Eric on the consortium payroll might explain who had run Nyles and perhaps Shari off the road, and also who might have broken into Sarah's house. And of course there was Martin's murder. Was someone like Eric capable of that?

Phil MacDonald offered to check into whether anyone named "Eric," fitting the large man's description, worked for either the Wine Consortium or one of the consortium's member wineries. He also reported that a closer examination of Shari Randall's car revealed traces of foreign paint on her rear bumper, suggesting that she might have been pushed off the road. The results were not conclusive enough to rule her death a homicide, but the crime lab thought that they could match the paint with FBI samples of different makes and years of automobiles.

When Nyles arrived home he still had a headache from the previous night's drinking and he took three more aspirins and a shower and went to bed. He set his alarm for 4:30 so that he would be up and rested when Cloris and Sarah arrived. He knew he was trying to cover up any evidence of his previous night's over-drinking at the wine gala, although he suspected that, as usual, he would tell his wife about it simply because it would make him feel guilty if he didn't.

He was awake and having coffee in the kitchen when the two women arrived home. They were tired, but not exhausted, having driven from Mountain View, near San Jose, where they'd gone to interview one of Martin's victims. All three of them went into the living room and Sarah brought herself and Cloris a glass of white wine. Nyles stuck with his coffee; the thought of a glass of wine caused his stomach to react with nausea.

The first thing Nyles did was to tell the two women about Shari Randall. They both were aghast, especially when he told them that it was possible that someone was responsible for her death.

"The same person who killed Martin?" Sarah asked, a pained expression on her face.

Nyles wasn't sure. In his own mind, he was certain that someone from the Wine Consortium had been involved with Shari's death, but there were a lot of things that didn't add up when it came to who killed Martin. He still thought at least two people had to be involved, or the murderer would have been stranded at the grove of trees after he left Martin's car there. It made no sense that someone would kill Martin and then come back later to search the house when they could have searched it the day of the murder. If someone from the Wine Consortium had used Shari's key to commit the burglary, it wasn't at all clear to him that the same person had killed Martin. He didn't share his ruminations about Shari's or Martin's murders, but instead told the two women that he didn't know the answer to Sarah's question. He said that Phil MacDonald was looking into Shari's death as a possible homicide and that the sheriff's office was following up on some leads related to paint scratches on the bumper of the secretary's car.

Sarah was concerned about her son, whom she knew was close to Shari. Nyles told them that he had talked to Ronnie and that the young man had, as his mother suspected, been very

broken up by the secretary's death. Sarah excused herself and said she was going to call her son to see how he was feeling.

While Sarah was out of the room, Nyles asked Cloris about their trip.

The two women had gone to Mountain View south of San Francisco, to interview the father of a woman named Janine Weyland, a young woman who, five years earlier, had been a Capital Fellow, a recent graduate of Santa Clara University, who had been placed in Martin's senatorial office. The WFB records indicated that Martin had molested the young woman in some way, possibly even raped her, causing her to leave her fellowship, and even the field of politics, to return to Mountain View. They learned from the WFB files that Janine had committed suicide a month ago.

"And you wanted to talk to her father?" Nyles asked. "He knew about his daughter's molestation?"

"He blamed her suicide on it." Cloris answered.

"And I think he was right," Sarah added, walking into the room. "Martin's behavior caused irreparable damage to that poor girl."

"But you said it happened five years ago," Nyles said, "and she committed suicide a month ago."

"She'd been depressed for a long time," Sarah explained, pouring herself another glass of wine and then sitting down next to Cloris. Sarah's face showed signs of worry. Nyles thought it was due to something more than the sad tale of one of her husband's victims. "She'd attempted suicide twice before," Sarah explained.

“And nothing was done to Martin because of this?” Nyles asked, although he was sure that nothing had been. “His actions were never made public, even?”

“No one knew,” Cloris answered. “Or at least almost no one. The poor girl refused to talk about it or report it. She apparently was so traumatized and so intimidated by Martin’s power and the good ‘ol boy network in Sacramento that she didn’t say anything to anyone except a few friends.”

“But you said her father knew. I thought girls didn’t tell their fathers that sort of thing.” Nyles wasn’t sure, but it seemed to him that a father was probably the last person a young woman would confide in about sexual matters. “And what about her mother?” he asked.

Sarah answered him. “Her mother has been dead since she was young. She was raised by her father, who is a high school teacher. And you’re right. He only found out about the molestation after she died. Her friends told him.”

“He must have been angry,” Nyles said, wondering if he suddenly had a new suspect in Martin’s death.

“He’s angry,” Cloris answered. “He would barely talk to Sarah when he found out she was Martin’s wife. He had to be convinced that we were trying to track down Martin’s victims and help them... although we were too late for his daughter. But he’s more depressed than he is angry. He could barely talk about his daughter to either of us, even after he trusted us.”

“So how did what Martin did to Janine Weyland get in the WFB files if she refused to talk about it?” he asked.

“Her friends. Some of them are in Sacramento and they actually joined WFB after they found out what Martin did to Janine. She was very close to some of them.”

“Would her father talk to me, do you think?” Nyles asked.

“Why do you want to talk to him?” Cloris asked him.

“Someone killed Martin. An angry father might do something like that.”

“Not Max Weyland,” Sarah said. “He’s angry, but he’s not violent. He didn’t even know Martin and I lived in Napa.”

“You asked him?”

“It came up in our conversation. I told him that Martin had died in the fires. I didn’t tell him that he was murdered. He didn’t know that Martin had died.”

*Or so he said*, Nyles thought to himself. “I’d still like to talk to him,” he said.

“He’s very fragile, Nyles,” Sarah said. “Martin ruined his and his daughter’s lives while he was alive. I don’t want to keep on causing him pain, now that Martin is dead.”

“Even if he’s the one who killed Martin?”

Sarah nodded, looking straight at him. “Yes.” She began to tear up. “I wish I’d just let Martin’s death be,” she said. “I don’t want to cause that poor man who lost his daughter to suffer more, and Shari Randall—what if your asking questions is why she was killed?”

Her questions were ones he was asking himself. A lecherous, dishonest bully had died and Nyles efforts to unearth his murderer might have put an innocent person in danger. He didn’t know what to say to her.

Sarah lowered her head. “I’m not blaming you, Nyles. I’m the one who asked you to look into Martin’s death. But Martin is dead and nothing is going to bring him back. He’s probably better off anyway, given his condition. And now Shari’s dead, and ...” she looked up, her eyes

filled with anxiety. “Ronnie’s missing. He’s not home and I called his work and they said he hasn’t been in since Shari died. No one has heard from him.”

*So that’s what’s bothering her*, Nyles thought to himself. Had his meddling created one more victim? “Has anyone checked his house?” he asked. Ronnie had been upset by Shari’s death, even blaming himself for having asked her to drive to his house, but Nyles didn’t think he was upset enough to have harmed himself. Still, he was drunk at ten in the morning and he could have fallen.

“His secretary, who knows where he keeps his key went to the house, just to check, but he wasn’t there.”

“And everything was in place—it didn’t look as if there’d been an intruder or anything?” Nyles asked.

Sarah’s looked alarmed. “She didn’t mention anything unusual. Do you think Ronnie’s in danger?”

He saw that his words had frightened her. He felt as if he always said the wrong thing. In truth, he couldn’t think of any reason someone would have tried to harm her son. “No, but maybe I’ll go over there and look around. Do you have a key?”

She took her key ring from her purse and detached a key. “Should I come with you?”

He shook his head. “I’ll call and let you know if I find anything.”

Sarah looked at Cloris. Her anxiety was apparent in her eyes.

“Don’t worry,” Cloris said, taking her friend’s hand. “Nyles knows how to find someone who’s missing. That was his job... or at least it used to be.”

*It still is*, he thought. But usually he was searching for a criminal or a victim. He hoped Ronnie Overman was neither.



## Chapter 30

The house didn't look as if had been disturbed, but that didn't mean that things were in order. Ronnie had evidently continued drinking after Nyles had left him the other morning. There were two empty whiskey bottles on the counter top in the kitchen. Some scraps of pizza were left on a plate on the kitchen table and a block of cheese was open on a plate on the coffee table in front of the couch. Ronnie's bed was unmade, but it didn't look as if any violence had taken place in the house. Nyles wondered if Ronnie's depression had worsened after he left. Nyles hadn't reassured him by suggesting that his invitation to Shari to come over might have put her in danger from someone from the Wine Consortium who wanted to put a scare into her... or worse. But that didn't explain where Ronnie might have gone. Nyles wondered if the young man was trying to get away to deal with his depression or if he might be guilty of something more and decided it was time to leave the area.

He called Sarah and told her that he didn't know where Ronnie was, but that he doubted that anyone else had entered his house, except his secretary to check on his whereabouts. She reported that she was still unable to reach him on his cell phone. "It sounds as if he doesn't want to be found," Nyles told her.

"He did this once before," Sarah said. "When Shari broke up with him. That's why I didn't want them to get back together. I knew he was still in love with her."

Nyles hadn't realized that it had been Shari who'd ended their earlier relationship—or that they might have resumed their affair—or possibly Ronnie was frustrated that they hadn't. The young man was more of a mystery than he'd thought. "Where did he go that time?" he asked Sarah.

“He has a cabin near Lake Berryessa.”

He asked her if she’d called him there, and she told him she had, but there was no answer. “Do you think he’s safe if he just wants to be left alone?” he asked.

There was a long pause. “He told me that he’d considered suicide when he disappeared before... after Shari left him.”

He told her to text him the address and he’d put it in his navigation system and drive to Lake Berryessa. He wasn’t sure where that was, but he’d seen enough signs along the road to know that it wasn’t too far away. She agreed to send him the address. “Please make sure my boy is OK, Nyles,” Sarah begged him. “And be careful. He has a gun up there,” she added.

Nyles felt a chill. A gun and suicidal thoughts were a deadly combination. So was a gun and the desire to escape if Sarah’s son was guilty of more than blaming himself for Shari Randall’s death. There was still the matter of Ronnie’s father’s murder.

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Lake Berryessa was familiar to Nyles as the site of one of the infamous *Zodiac Killer’s* murders. The murder had occurred when Nyles was only a teenager, but he’d heard a lot about it from Phil MacDonald when the two of them were pursuing leads on the Silent Night Killer, another serial killer who operated in both Northern and Southern California. The Zodiac’s cases were still open in Napa County, although the killer’s last recorded murder was in Santa Barbara in 1974. The Lake Berryessa murder occurred in 1969 and involved the death of a female college student who was stabbed, along with her male friend who survived, by a mysteriously garbed man while the couple was picnicking on the edge of the lake.

The lake was an hour drive from Ronnie's house on the border of Napa and Sonoma counties and nestled in a valley in the low pine-covered mountains. The lake itself had been formed by damming a creek in the late 1950's and flooding an entire town and its surrounding farmland. It was fifteen miles long and, at its widest, three miles across; an oblong shape with numerous tendrils branching off, like an insect's legs, following the heavily forested edges of the valley from its beginning where the river flowed into it, to the massive dam at its other end, where water descended to the creek below through a circular spillway nicknamed the "glory hole." Nyles could see its shimmering surface in the distance as he followed the instructions of his Prius' navigation system into the hills surrounding the lake and down a narrow, paved country road with mostly vacant forest land on either side. The voice on the navigation system told him "you have arrived at your destination" when he was opposite a gravel road leading up a hill into the woods. He couldn't see Ronnie's cabin from the road, so he turned onto the gravel road and headed up the hill through the trees.

Ronnie's black Maserati was parked in a dusty turnout just as the cabin came into view. The turnout held two cars, so Nyles parked his Prius and began walking toward the cabin, at the top of the hill. He'd debated taking his gun with him and decided against it. His obligation to Sarah was to bring her son back alive.

The "cabin" was a two-story unpainted clapboard house with weathered gray sides, a wood shingled roof and three steps in front leading up to a wide front porch, giving it the appearance of a rustic farmhouse. The front door was partially open. As he trudged up the hill he heard a shot, which seemed to come from inside the house. He ducked into the bushes at the side of the road but, after waiting for a few moments, he decided that the shot had not been aimed at him. He broke into a run toward the cabin, took the stairs onto the porch two at a time and

pushed the front door the rest of the way open. Ronnie was sitting in a swivel chair in front of a side window. He had a pistol in his hand. His eyes were closed. An empty glass and a half-full bottle of whiskey stood on a table a little distance from the chair.

“Hello?” Nyles said, stopping just inside the door. He held his breath, waiting for a sign of movement.

Ronnie opened his eyes and swung the chair around. He looked up at Nyles, startled. His gun was pointed directly at Nyles. “You’re a pretty good detective.” He set the gun on the table next to his chair.

“Your mother thought you might be here. She’s worried about you.” Nyles looked pointedly at the gun on the table.

“I thought Shari and I could get back together,” the young man said, looking down at the floor. “Instead, I killed her.”

“What do you mean?” Nyles started to walk toward the table with the gun, but Ronnie picked it back up and set it on his lap.

“She called me because she was scared. I should have gone to her house instead of letting her drive to mine. She’s dead because of me. I came up here to kill myself.”

“I heard a shot,” Nyles said.

“Just making sure the gun worked. I haven't made up my mind yet.” He was fingering the pistol in his lap.

“You didn’t kill Shari.”

“I asked her to come to my house. I knew she’d been drinking. I should have gone to her.” He was still running his hand over the handle of the gun.

“She didn’t run off the road because she was drunk. Someone else ran her off the road.”

Ronnie looked up at him. “That’s what you told me before. How do I know I can believe you?”

“Sheriff MacDonald is investigating her death as a murder.” He was stretching the truth, but the main issue right now was to calm Ronnie down and get the gun away from him.

Ronnie’s face registered his surprise. “A murder? Who...?”

Nyles didn’t want to say too much or Ronnie might decide to use the gun to go after the Wine Consortium people. “That’s what the sheriff is investigating.” He took another step toward the young man. “You could be of help in the investigation.”

“Me?”

“You know who Shari talked to, who her friends and co-workers were. This could be related to your father’s memoir.”

Ronnie was still rubbing the handle of the pistol in his lap. “You mean those people at the Wine Consortium?” Nyles could see the anger on his face.

“I don’t know and neither does Sheriff MacDonald. It’s all part of the investigation. If anyone from the Wine Consortium had anything to do with it, you can help get them by talking to the sheriff.” He looked down at the gun. “Why don’t you give me the gun and I’ll make some coffee and we’ll get you sober enough to drive back and talk to Sheriff MacDonald.”

Ronnie picked up the gun. He rested his finger on the trigger and seemed to be thinking. Then he handed the gun to Nyles. "I know this was stupid, but I loved her."

"I can see that," Nyles answered, taking the gun. "I'll make some coffee and you call your mother. Tell her I'm here and you're OK."

## Chapter 31

“The paint scratches on the Randall woman’s car were from a Toyota, the color of something called *Predawn Gray Mica*,” Sheriff Phil MacDonald told him over the phone. Nyles had returned to Napa, and Ronnie had returned home. His mother and Cloris were visiting him. Nyles was driving while talking to MacDonald on his cell phone. He was on the familiar Route 121 and had left the industrial area surrounding Napa. He gazed out at the seemingly endless vineyards stretching into the rolling hills on either side of the highway. “Toyota only came out with the color in 2015,” MacDonald continued. “It’s on Corollas, Camry’s and SUVs, but not pickups. There’s probably hundreds of them in Napa and Sonoma counties, but we’re gonna follow up with local dealers to see who bought one, though they could have bought it anywhere.”

“How about Eric?” Nyles asked.

“There’s no one named Eric who works directly for the Napa Valley Wine Consortium, but whether he works for one of the member wineries is anybody’s guess. There’s no way to get a list of all their employees, not without warrants, and we haven’t got enough evidence to convince a judge to grant us one for something like that.”

No matter, Nyles thought. He was on his way to *Baron Winery*, the eponymous enterprise of the Chairman of the Napa Valley Wine Consortium Executive Board, which was located on the top of one of the highest hills near the border of Napa and Sonoma counties. He turned off the highway and, as he drove up the hill on the winding road leading to the winery and its tasting room, he had an even better view of the vast rolling vineyards stretching for miles below him. He knew from his Google search that the winery was an amalgam of three smaller wineries, all bought by Baron and combined through one central location, which served as the winery’s laboratories, its processing plant, the cellars, and, because of the size of its operation, its own

bottling facilities, as well as a massive and elaborate tasting facility and meeting center, complete with its own food services.

Nyles was puzzled as he neared the top of the hill and saw no great European-style buildings, as often graced the grounds of the other Napa wineries. Instead, a low, expansive structure was built into the apex of the hill, with a massive, square concrete building crowning the slope but with wide picture windows built into the hillside below the hill's crest, indicating that the bulk of the building was underground, resembling some kind of bunker more than a traditional wine grower's estate. A series of wide steps with a waterfall sluicing down their center and splashing into a rectangular pool at the bottom, provided the relaxing sound of rushing water and led from the parking lot, just below the crest of the hill up to the building on its summit. Nyles felt as if he were ascending toward a temple, rather than a wine-tasting room.

Atop the hill, he found himself walking across a broad concrete "park" dotted with contemporary abstract statues, resembling the plaza of one of the museums Nyles had visited with Cloris in Los Angeles or perhaps the *Louvre*, which he had only seen in pictures. In front of him was the entrance to the *Baron Wine Center* as the block letters above the glass door to the square concrete structure indicated the building was called. A young woman in a uniform, which reminded Nyles of a flight attendant's, greeted him at the door, introduced herself as "Laurie," and asked him if he had a reservation.

I hadn't occurred to him that a reservation was needed for a wine tasting, but perhaps she thought he was an attendee at some other event in the "center." Perhaps the fact that he was wearing a sport coat, rather than vacation attire, confused her. He gave Laurie an apologetic smile and confessed that he had not made a reservation. Her round, friendly face remained fixed in a smile and she nodded, as if he had given her the perfect answer. She happily told him that



the main tasting room was open to him, but that the meeting rooms and restaurant were reserved for guests with advance reservations or members of the winery's wine club.

He had no intention of sticking to the permissible confines of the public tasting room, but he smiled back at her and thanked her and then allowed her to escort him into a very large room, in the center of which was a bar lined with stools and behind which were several young men and women, attired similarly to his hostess, who were pouring glasses of wine for about twenty guests. Perhaps to make sure that he didn't stray into private areas of the building, Laurie escorted him right up to the bar and introduced him to "Kim," another young woman, this time Asian, who would provide him with samples of the winery's offerings.

He requested a flight of reds, which seemed to please Kim, although the staff had obviously been trained to act pleased at virtually anything a visitor said or asked for. The young woman, who had a studious appearance, with glasses and straight dark hair falling below her shoulders, proved to be a fount of knowledge with regard to the winery, its products, and the wine industry in general. She described the Pinot Noir, Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon and Zinfandel as she poured each, explaining the differences in grapes and growing conditions involved in producing each wine. Intrigued by her depth of knowledge, Nyles asked her how she knew so much, and she confided that she was a recent graduate of the wine program at UC Davis and was hoping to learn the industry from the bottom up by starting out as a pourer in a tasting room.

"This is an elaborate facility for twenty or so customers," Nyles said, looking around the room at the others seated at the bar. They seemed to be a mix of young singles and older couples, all of them appearing to be having a good time, some laughing and joking while others

had very serious expressions on their faces as they swirled their glasses of wine, sniffed before sampling, and nodded in solemn appreciation of whatever they has just tasted.

“Things have slowed down since the fires,” Kim told him. “But this facility is really designed more for events than just as a tasting room. Baron Winery sells most of its products to restaurants and wine brokers, unlike many of the other Napa wineries, which make most of their sales through their tasting rooms and wine clubs. We host a number of corporate meetings to help get our name out to the public.”

“So you’re more entrepreneurial than some of the other wineries?” he asked.

“It’s why I chose this winery to start my career,” she said seriously, then, perhaps remembering her role, smiled cheerily. “Baron and other members of our local Wine Consortium are very outward looking when it comes to getting their wines known. There is a vast untapped market of new wine drinkers in the United States, and the international market, particularly Asia—China, Japan, even Vietnam— is booming. Those countries have always been beer or rice wine markets, but they're opening up and California wines are becoming popular.”

He understood why a businessman, especially a hedge fund manager such as Gerald Baron, who was used to pursuing high-risk ventures, would jump into the wine business, although he had also been told by Howard Goode, that Baron also liked the acquired air of sophistication that came with owning a winery. He thanked Kim for her educational discussion and asked for directions to the restroom.

The restroom was off the hallway outside of the tasting room and Nyles saw that Laurie was busy greeting new arrivals at the door. Across from the restrooms was an elevator, which didn’t appear to require a key, and Nyles punched the button. When the door opened, he stepped

inside. There were two floors beneath the one he was on. He imagined that the bottom floor was mostly storage or wine cellars and pushed the button for the floor immediately below his.

He exited the elevator into another hallway, at the end of which was one of the wide picture windows he had seen cut into the hillside when he had driven up. He could tell that he wasn't alone, as he heard voices coming from the open door of a room down the hallway. To his left were double doors, which he opened just enough to see that they contained an empty auditorium, directly beneath the tasting room upstairs. The hallway turned right at its end, in front of the window and he imagined that it might go around the perimeter of the building with meeting rooms on the inside. Behind him, was an open door with a sign for a restaurant over it. He looked inside and saw that there were several people eating, some sitting at the bar, and that the other end of the room was another wide picture window, which he assumed was also cut into the hillside. He was even more reminded of a vast underground fortress. As he stepped away from the door he heard footsteps at the end of the hallway and saw Eric, rounding the corner. He stepped back into the restaurant doorway.

Eric stopped and turned, and Gerald Baron came around the same corner, joining him. They conversed for a few minutes and then both began walking toward the restaurant where Nyles was standing. He felt his heart beating faster. Eric was bound to recognize him, although Baron had never laid eyes upon him before. He tried to figure out what he would say. Before anything occurred to him, Eric stopped in front of the elevator and pushed the button. Nyles heard Baron tell him to "get it done ASAP," and when the elevator door opened, Eric stepped inside, while Baron turned toward the restaurant.

Nyles strode up to him.

“Mr. Baron?” Nyles stuck out his hand. “Nyles Monahan... a fiend of Martin and Sarah Overman... and of Ronnie, of course.”

Baron’s handsome face showed a moment of discomfiture, then he smiled broadly. “Very pleased to meet you, Mr. Monahan. Are you here for the Chamber of Commerce meeting?”

Nyles guessed that it was the local Chamber of Commerce that was in the meeting room down the hall. He gazed at Baron’s confident face. The winery owner was dressed in a sport coat and slacks and a shirt, open at the collar, minus the ascot he had been wearing for the gala in San Francisco. “Actually, I’m just looking the place over. Shari Randall told me I’d be impressed if I visited your winery.”

Baron’s expression transformed smoothly from one of superficial friendliness to thoughtful sorrow. He shook his head sadly. “Shari’s death was a tragedy. Everyone at the Wine Consortium was devastated, as were many others who knew her and held her in great affection. Were you a friend of hers?”

Nyles was sure that Baron knew exactly who he was and his relationship to Shari Randall. The winery owner was a man who concealed his true feelings well. “I only knew her through her job with Martin Overman... before she began working with the Wine Consortium. I was interested in the memoir she was typing for Senator Overman.”

Baron smiled. “Yes, I heard she had some sort of secretarial job for the late senator. His death was also a tragedy. There were many tragedies associated with the fires, I’m afraid. We lost two of our buildings here at the winery, but thank God, none of our staff was injured. I didn’t really know the senator, but it was a shame what happened to him.”

“I’d thought you did some business with Senator Martin in the past,” Nyles said, studying Baron’s face for a reaction. “Shari told me that he’d talked about it in his memoir.”

“Not really,” the winery owner answered, his smile remaining on his face. “Mr. Stalworth, the Manager of Government Relations at the Wine Consortium, no doubt had considerable contact with the senator when he was still in Sacramento. He was always a great friend to the wine industry.” His smile had become strained, as if he had somewhere else he needed to be.

Nyles too, was ready to end the conversation. Their verbal sparring had not revealed anything to him. He wondered about Eric. “The man I saw you talking to just a minute ago—the one who got on the elevator—is he one of your employees?”

“He’s our head of security, both here and for our other wine operations,” Baron answered. “Why do you ask?”

“I just thought he looked familiar,” Nyles said. “What’s his name?”

“Eric Leavitt,” Baron answered. He was no longer smiling. “I’m afraid I have to go, Mr. Monahan.” His smile returned. “Perhaps you’d like to enjoy our tasting room upstairs? I’d be happy to escort you to it.”

“I know where it is,” Nyles answered. “Thank you for your time, Mr. Baron.”

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He had Eric’s last name, now he needed to find out if he drove a 2015 or later gray Toyota. He was in the parking lot, looking around for the employee parking area. At the end of the public parking was a sign telling visitors not to enter the next lot, which was reserved for employees. He hoped that Eric had not left. He was on foot and he walked among the thirty or so

cars and pickups parked in the lot. Sure enough there was a gray late model Toyota. He wasn't sure what year it was, or if the color was actually *Predawn Gray Mica*, but it was the only gray Toyota in the parking lot. He examined the front bumper. There was a two-inch wide scratch, about four inches long with traces of white paint on it. He didn't know what color car Shari Randall had driven, but the placement of the scratch and the paint from another car fit what he imagined could have happened. He took down the license number. He could wait and see if Eric eventually came out and got into car, but it was easier just to have Phil MacDonald run the license number through the DMV. Nyles returned to his car and left.

## Chapter 32

“Leavitt has a record,” Phil MacDonald told Nyles over the phone. “He was arrested for assault in 2004, but not convicted. I don't know if he was working for Baron Winery at that time. I'm going to bring him in for questioning... and impound his car. We'll run a match on the paint on his bumper and the paint on Shari Randall's bumper.”

“Can I listen in on the questioning?” Nyles asked.

There was a pause on the other end of the line. “I guess you've earned it, since you gave us Leavitt,” MacDonald finally said. “Although I'm not advertising to anyone that you'll be there, since it violates his rights of privacy.”

“Hire me as a consultant. I'll work for free, but you can give me a contract and that'll clear you of any privacy problems involving me.”

“You're a crafty bastard, you know that?”

“I've had to work that angle before with the LAPD when they wanted me to listen to an interview. It's all legal.”

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Detective Lieutenant Rick Waters spent over an hour questioning Eric Leavitt about his activities the night Shari Randall was run off the road, but Leavitt didn't persist in claiming he was home alone watching TV. He didn't seem bothered by Waters' questioning, but finally he asked for a lawyer. Waters left the interview and came into the observation room where the sheriff and Nyles were watching. “He's not going to say anything. Now he wants his lawyer.”

Let me take a crack at him, Sheriff MacDonald said. He left and entered the interview room where Eric Leavitt was sitting. “You can have a lawyer, but I just wanted you to know what our lab has found out,” MacDonald told him. “Your car has traces of Shari Randall’s paint on it, and hers has traces of your paint.”

Leavitt’s sullen expression remained on his face, but his eyes darted around the room, as if he were looking for a means of escape. “Maybe I bumped into her at a mall or something,” he answered, glancing briefly at the detective, then down at the table between them.

“This isn’t just an interview anymore. I’m arresting you for her murder,” MacDonald said, his voice flat and matter-of-fact. “You ran her off the road and she died when she crashed.”

Leavitt’s stoic expression dissolved into panic. His eyes searched the room and his breath came in short, quick gasps. With his eyes pleading, he looked up at the sheriff. “I said I want a lawyer.”

“That’s a good idea,” MacDonald answered. “ You’ve got a cell phone, go ahead and make the call. Oh and by the way, I hope your lawyer isn’t the same one who works for Baron Wineries, because, if one of your bosses is involved, he’s going to throw you under the bus.”

Leavitt eyes widened in panic. “I didn’t kill that woman. She ran off the road, but I was only trying to scare her. I drove up behind her and she slowed down all of a sudden and I ran into the back of her car. I had no idea she was going to slow down like that. I just tapped her bumper and she ran off the road.”

“You didn’t stop to see if she was injured?”

“It didn’t look too serious to me. Anyway, I was too scared.”

“Why were you trying to scare her? Did Mr. Baron tell you to do that?”



Leavitt still looked frightened, but his breathing had become more regular. “I’ve said all I’m going to say. I didn’t kill her on purpose. I want a lawyer before I say anything more.” He struggled to look MacDonald in the eyes, but failed and ended up staring down at the table in front of him. His shoulders had slumped and he looked dejected.

“Do you think your Baron is going to save you or his own skin?”

Leavitt kept staring at the floor. “It wasn’t Baron who told me to do it.”

“Who was it?”

“Mr. Stalworth—he works for the Wine Consortium.”

“What did he tell you to do?”

“I need a lawyer,” Leavitt said, his face hardening. “Not one from Baron Wineries or the Wine Consortium. I need to get my own lawyer. I’m not saying anything more until I have lawyer.”

MacDonald came into the room where Nyles was sitting in front of the CCTV monitor. “He said more than he should have,” MacDonald said. “It won’t be so easy once his lawyer shows up.”

“Once your people examined the car, you had him,” Nyles answered. “The trick is to get him to admit that his boss ordered him to do it... or at least ordered him to scare Shari Randall. I’m willing to buy that he didn’t intend to kill her, even though he’s already admitted at least negligent homicide.”

“We’ll get the answers from him, lawyer or no lawyer. He’s already said enough to implicate Stalworth. I’m going to bring him in next.”

“I’m willing to bet that Baron’s in on it too, although maybe he didn’t order Leavitt to do anything to Shari Randall. If he did, you can probably get Stalworth to admit it to get himself off the hook.”

“Leavitt’s the weak link. He can’t keep his mouth shut. We’ll see if Stalworth cracks as easily.”

“What about Overman’s murder?” Nyles asked. Shari Randall was a victim because she had given the key to Stalworth so he—or Eric—could break into Martin Overman’s house to try to gain possession of the memoir, but neither Stalworth nor Baron had a reason to kill Martin, and if they had, why hadn’t they taken his computer at that time?

“We don’t have anything to tie them directly to Overman’s death.” MacDonald answered. “I’ll have to see what I can get out of them.”

“You’ll get more out of Leavitt. I’d keep going after him, if I were you.” It was possible that Leavitt had bungled an attempt to scare Martin the same way he had bungled scaring Shari, and perhaps Leavitt didn’t know about the computer.

MacDonald shook his head. “You’ve been right so far. I think you’re probably right about that, too.”

Nyles wasn’t as confident as MacDonald. There were still too many unanswered questions.

## Chapter 33

Nyles was back at Sarah's house, hoping to spend time with Cloris instead of both of them running all over northern California, she looking for Martin's victims and he looking for Martin's killer. He was surprised when MacDonald called him to say that Stalworth had spilled the beans and admitted everything—the burglary, that he had told Eric to try to scare both Nyles and Shari, although not wanting either of them harmed. Stalworth offered to tell everything he knew in order to reduce the charges against him—which was basically that it was all Gerald Baron's idea. Once Stalworth had admitted it all, Eric Leavitt did also, leaving Baron dangling in the wind.

Unfortunately, Gerald Baron was nowhere to be found.

According to Sheriff MacDonald, neither Eric Leavitt nor David Stalworth had admitted having anything to do with Martin Overman's murder. Both of them had alibis for the day on which Martin had been killed. That still left Gerald Baron, but Nyles had his doubts that the millionaire hedge fund manager and winery owner would have carried out such an act himself, since he appeared to have used an underling such as Eric for carrying out all of his other nefarious activities, such as scaring Shari Randall and Nyles. But Baron was still responsible for Shari's death, at least indirectly, even if he hadn't driven the car that ran her off the road, and it gnawed at Nyles that Baron had apparently disappeared. The winery owner wasn't the type to take his own life, as Ronnie Overman had wanted to do, out of guilt for his misdeeds. He was more likely to be in hiding. Nyles knew it was the Sheriff Department's job to find Baron, but he couldn't rest, knowing that, with Baron's resources, the millionaire might get away.

The smallest of Baron Winery's vineyards was not even in Napa County, but toward the coast, in Mendocino County. When Nyles and Phil MacDonald had been tracking the "Silent

Night Killer” Nyles had traveled to the town of Mendocino after a gruesome murder of a young woman at an organic produce farm had alerted him that the killer might have gone that far north. Nyles had been impressed by the wilderness that was what people called the “Lost Coast,” from Mendocino to Eureka, particularly in the mountains, which had become the home to numerous, at that time illegal, marijuana farms, and a thriving, and sometimes vicious, drug culture. It seemed to him that the *lost coast* was a perfect place for Gerald Baron to disappear.

Cloris and Sarah had settled back into the Napa house and, although daily wine drinking—confined to the evening hours as far as Nyles could tell—had again become part of their daily ritual, they both seemed to be keeping their drinking under control. Sarah was deeply grateful for Nyles having “saved” Ronnie, in her opinion, although Nyles tried to downplay his role and said that her son had just wanted to get away to deal with his grief and sort things out. Sarah still blamed Shari Randall for her son’s emotional problems and berated herself for letting Shari into her house to type her husband’s memoir.

Nyles had finally confessed his besotted adventure in San Francisco at the Wine Consortium gala event to Cloris, and he emerged reassured, when his admission of his ill-advised drinking spree had provoked no similar admission on the part of his wife. She simply laughed when she heard that he had been escorted from the event. Now that Ronnie appeared to be safe and back to work, she and Sarah were trying to establish a closer relationship with Max Weyland, the father of the young woman whom Martin had assaulted and who had recently committed suicide. Both of them were concerned about the bereft father of the girl.

He told the women that he had an idea where to find Gerald Baron and that he was going to follow the idea up and he would be back within a day or two. Sarah was surprised that Nyles would take on such a task himself instead of informing Sheriff MacDonald. “I don’t want you

risking yourself, Nyles,” she told him and Cloris. “So far this quest to find Martin’s killer has produced more harm than good. I couldn’t stand it if something happened to you.”

“Phil MacDonald doesn’t have enough men to go traipsing up to Mendocino, where I’m headed,” he explained to Sarah. “The idea that Baron is hiding up there, is a long shot that I’m the only one interested in pursuing.” He looked over at his wife to see if she, too, had misgivings about his going after Baron on his own.

Cloris’ gaze met his. “My husband knows what he’s doing,” she said, still looking at Nyles. “I know you’ll be careful,” she added. She turned to Sarah. “Nyles is the best person at finding someone that I know. I’m not worried about him.”

Sarah looked skeptical, but she nodded in acquiescence.

His first stop was at the offices of the Wine Consortium. When he pulled into the parking lot, he was glad to see that the offices looked open. He knew that David Stalworth would not be in his office, since he was no doubt still in the Napa County jail, but none of the other staff members of the consortium had been implicated in Shari Randall’s death.

Norma Doan didn’t look any happier to see him than she had the last time he had been in the offices. Sylvia Lu looked as if she had been crying again, perhaps this time over the arrest of one of her bosses. Nyles didn’t expect that anyone in the office would tell him where Gerald Baron might be—he doubted if any of them knew. What he needed to find out was exactly where Baron’s Mendocino Vineyards were located, something he assumed the Wine Consortium had in their records, or possibly even in their public information material.

While Norma went to get Tom Patton, the consortium’s Public Relations Manager, Nyles went through the brochures that were in the lobby. A map in one of them showed the location of

all the member wineries, but Baron Wineries' only location was at the place he had visited, where they had their tasting room. He was interrupted in his browsing by Tom Patton.

Patton remembered Nyles from the gala event in San Francisco, but he seemed ignorant of Nyles' ignominious escort from the VIP room and unaware that his visitor was responsible for the arrest of his co-worker, David Stalworth, or that the Chairman of the consortium's Executive Board was also wanted by the Sheriff's Department.

"I became interested in some of your member wineries after attending your gala," Nyles told him. "I wondered exactly where their vineyards are located."

The short, round blonde Public Relations Manager had a ready smile on his cherubic face and looked back at Nyles. Then he nodded toward the brochure Nyles was still holding. "I believe there's a map in that very brochure."

"Oh there is, but it only shows the main locations of the wineries. Baron Winery, for instance, whose tasting room I visited, has properties in several locations, or so I was told. The person who showed me around their winery even mentioned a very picturesque small winery in Mendocino which is part of their holdings."

The man's eyes lit up. "Ah yes. The former Latour Winery. Absolutely beautiful, near the coast on the steep hillsides of the mountain range behind the town of Mendocino. Mr. Baron wanted a fully organic offering and that was what Latour was famous for—their organic Pinot Noir—a very earthy wine. You can practically taste the forest soils and woody flavors. A lovely place to visit, with a tiny tasting room left over from the Latour days, but still operating, I believe."

"Do you have a map, or an address?"

“Certainly. Let me give you a map and show you where it is. I’ll give you the address, too. It’s up a narrow road, rather hard to find, but only a couple of miles off of Highway One and a half hour or so from Mendocino.”

“It sounds as if you’ve been there.”

“Oh yes. Mendocino is a favorite of mine and I visited the winery before Mr. Baron acquired it. In fact, I was the one who told him about it. It used to be operated by a family who lived up in the woods, behind the property... very rustic, one of those left-over from the sixties kind of families that you find up there.”

“And did Mr. Baron buy their house in the forest as well as the vineyards?”

“I believe he did.” Patton looked at him quizzically. “Why do you ask?”

“Just curious.” Nyles smiled back at him. “How about that map you mentioned?”

Patton went back to his office, then returned with a map of Mendocino county and spread it out on the table in the lobby. He circled an area near the town of Mendocino, then wrote the address on the map, refolding it and handing it to Nyles. “Are you planning to visit?”

Nyles shrugged. “I don’t know if I have time on this trip, but I’d like to in the future.” He thanked Patton for his help and, under the angry glare of Norma Doan from behind her desk in her office, he left the building.

## Chapter 34

If Nyles weren't so focused on finding Gerald Baron, he would have found the drive to Mendocino relaxing and spectacular. Passing through St. Helena, and its picturesque Victorian houses, he remembered his conversation with the former wine columnist, Howard Goode. The newspaperman's testimony had been the key to establishing that the references to a bribery in Martin Overman's memoir were true. From there, the trail had led to the Wine Consortium and finally to Gerald Baron, whom Nyles was now determined to track down. Nyles knew that he ought to have told Phil MacDonald about Baron's Mendocino vineyards; it was a longshot that the winery owner was there. Nyles also knew that he was reluctant to turn the case completely over to the sheriff's department. The feeling of tracking down a suspect was invigorating, and now because of it, he'd stopped worrying about his mental faculties. After all, he'd been proved right at every turn of the investigation so far. If he were developing Alzheimer's, would he have been able to follow the case as far as he had?

After St. Helena, he drove through the tiny towns of Calistoga and Geyserville, whose small populations belied their prominence as wine producing regions and tourist attractions. The Anderson Valley, in Mendocino County was a region of rolling hills, mostly covered in forest but interspersed with vineyards. Nyles couldn't resist stopping at the Anderson Valley Brewery for a glass of their famous "Boont Amber." The beer was named after the esoteric language called "Boontling" spoken by residents of the valley through much of the early part of the last century, mostly as a way to confuse outsiders.

One glass of beer helped buoy his spirits and it was with renewed optimism that Nyles reentered highway 128 and completed the final leg of his journey. His route brought him to the coast highway and he followed its winding course, more like a twisting mountain road than a



highway, along the rugged coastline to the high plateau on which stood the town of Mendocino. The small village—the jewel of the northern California coast—overlooked the Pacific Ocean. He had been to Mendocino before, but he still marveled at its rustic character and the proliferation of a sixties-era culture, which he knew supported organic farming, including a farmer’s market right in the middle of town. The market sold produce from local farmers, some of whom still lived in communes. In the past it had also been a haven for marijuana growers who hid their farms in the high valleys amidst the mountain forests and had a ready market for their goods in the town below. Mendocino had also been the scene of a vicious murder on one of the isolated farms that inhabited one of those mountain valleys and which Nyles and Phil MacDonald had investigated as part of their search for the Silent Night Killer a little more than ten years before.

He didn’t have to remind himself that he wasn’t in Mendocino to vacation, or to gawk at sights such as the high ocean cliffs with the constantly angry waves crashing at their bases—a scene worthy of an English Gothic novel— or the historic Victorian Houses that were now mostly bed and breakfast establishments, or even the restored 1870’s Mendocino Hotel. The village of Mendocino—not Maine— had served as the location of the 1980’s and 90’s TV series *Murder She Wrote*, in which Cloris had once had a part in one episode, although her parts were all filmed at a studio in Los Angeles.

He took *Little Lake Road*, out of town and toward the mountains, which, even in early afternoon, were shrouded in mist so that their higher reaches were obscured from view. When he reached the spot indicated by his navigation system, he saw a sign pointing to a smaller road leading into the forest. The mall wooden sign announced “Baron Winery and Tasting Room: Organic Wines.” A cardboard sign, tacked on below the main one, said “Tasting Room Closed.” If Gerald Baron was here, he clearly didn’t want any visitors. Nyles turned onto the road.

The vineyards, which began to appear on either side of the road, didn't stretch very far into the forest and Nyles remembered that this winery grew only one type of grape—Pinot Noir. Nyles wondered why Baron would have bought a small winery such as this, which looked as if it had a limited ability to produce enough wines to sell on the larger market. Perhaps Baron had just wanted to be able to say that his winery had an organic wine among its collection. Or perhaps he had had this remote location in mind as a possible retreat in case he needed to get away from prying eyes. Nyles was about to pry.

Ahead were two wooden buildings, one a large structure where he assumed the wine processing activities took place, and the other a smaller house-like building with the sign “Tasting Room” over its door. There were no cars in sight. Baron must have sent all the workers home.

The door to the tasting room was locked. He peered through a window and saw a bar and a wall of wine bottles, as well as several small tables with chairs. The porch on which he was standing also contained two tables with chairs, and looked out over a small vineyard that stretched to the forest beyond.

Tom Patton had told him that, along with the winery, Baron had purchased the home of the Latour family, which was located somewhere in the forest behind the winery. There had to be a road leading to it, Nyles thought, and indeed, he found a dirt road leading from the back of the tasting room up the hill into the forest. He had no idea how far into the forest the house was, but he took a chance that it wasn't too far and decided to walk, rather than announce his presence by driving his car.

Although the sun was shining, the air was cool between the towering Evergreens on either side of the narrow road. Because of the constant mist and occasional showers in these

coastal mountains, the ground was damp, and he could make out fresh tire tracks in the wet dirt. Ahead, he could see a house through the trees and, as he got closer, a gray Range Rover parked alongside it. He continued walking, scanning the periphery of the house for anyone that might be outside. The house was two stories; a larger version of the building that served as a tasting room. It had a shingled roof, partially covered in moss, and a covered front porch and a lawn, both of which looked well-tended. There was also a garage, and he wondered why Baron, assuming that was who was in the house, had not parked his car in the garage if he was trying to stay hidden. As he started up the stairs to the porch, Gerald Baron stepped out from behind the Range Rover. He was holding a rifle.

“You’re a persistent son of a bitch,” Baron said, holding the rifle in the crook of his arm, with its barrel pointed at Nyles.

“You’re not hard to find. I’m pretty sure the authorities will figure it out soon enough.”

“Soon enough for what?” Baron asked, not lowering the rifle.

“To do the same thing I did, and come here,” Nyles answered. “You don’t really need that gun. I’m not armed.”

Baron lowered the rifle. “And I’m not a killer. Eric Leavitt was supposed to scare Shari Randall, not run her off the road. That was his doing.”

“And me too?”

“What do you mean, you too?”

“He tried to scare me the same way.”

“You weren’t harmed. That was all he was supposed to do with Shari.”

Nyles looked up at the house. “You live here?”

“Sometimes. Almost no one knows it even exists... except the winery employees and a few people from town who knew the Latours. But people up here respect your privacy. It’s a good place for me to get away.” He looked suddenly embarrassed. “I meant get away for a break from work, not get away from the authorities.” The gun was now pointing at the ground. “Shall we go inside?”

“Why not?”

Nyles expected the inside of the house to resemble a hunting cabin, although it was bigger than that and had clearly been a farmhouse—the family home of the original vineyard owners. But much of the furniture was modern—wood, but more Scandinavian style—expensive Scandinavian, not Ikea. The kitchen had obviously been redone with all modern appliances and granite counters. Baron really must actually use the house as a vacation retreat. Nyles took a seat in a wood framed leather chair. It had a footstool in front of it, but he sat forward, alert, ready to see what Baron planned to do. He kept his eyes on the rifle.

Baron sat on a matching couch. He laid the rifle down beside him on the couch. He’d taken off the parka he’d been wearing and was dressed in a green wool shirt underneath, which went with his brown corduroy pants and hiking boots. Nyles wondered if he had been planning to take off into the woods. “I know I’ll have to turn myself in. Either that or leave the country. Ronnie Overman told me that you used to be a cop. What are they going to charge me with?” He was anxious, but he also seemed removed, as if the situation seemed unreal to him.

“I don’t know,” Nyles answered. “If Eric is charged with murder you could be an accessory, or a co-conspirator.”

“But I never told him to kill her. Not even to hurt her.”

“Get a good lawyer. You could get off.”

“Really?” His voice was skeptical.

“I’m not a prosecutor or even a lawyer, but it seems like it. Of course there’s the burglary at Martin Overman’s house.”

Baron’s expression turned glum. “That was Stalworth’s idea, but I admit I knew about it. It was stupid.” He laid his hand on the stock of the rifle, but made no move to pick it up. “I guess I’m in a lot of trouble.” He stared at Nyles, a curious expression on his face. “I don’t think anyone knows I’m here except you.”

Nyles wondered if Baron was considering killing him. “There are more people looking for you than you think. They want to talk to you about killing Martin Overman?”

Baron’s expression turned to shock. “What are you talking about?”

“You tried to get rid of Overman’s memoir. Before that, somebody silenced him and tried to make it look like an accident.”

“I wouldn’t do something like that,” the winery owner said. For the first time, he looked frightened.

Nyles sensed that he had an advantage, at least for now. “Then why don’t you give me the rifle and we’ll call the local police. I’m sure there’s a warrant out for you. It won’t take long for them to learn about this place, anyway.”

Baron's hand was still resting on the stock of the rifle. He looked as if he was weighing what he should do. Then he picked up the gun and held it in both hands. "The sheriff really thinks I killed Martin Overman?"

"Unless you can convince him that you didn't," Nyles answered. He was stretching the truth because he could see he had an advantage as long as Baron was afraid. Baron was a person of interest in Martin's death, but that was all. His two colleagues had already been cleared.

Baron stood up, still holding the gun in both hands. He walked across the room to Nyles, who stood up, readying himself to try to disarm the man if he needed to. Baron was larger and younger than he was, but Nyles was pretty sure the man wasn't used to handling a gun at close quarters. Nyles had disarmed more dangerous men than him in the past. Baron looked him in the eyes, then handed him the gun. "Call the police," he said.

"It will look better for you if you call them yourself," Nyles said.

## Chapter 35

The story Gerald Baron recounted to Nyles while the two of them waited for the police to arrive, was confirmed when Phil MacDonald checked it out, later. Baron had been at an all-day business meeting in San Francisco on the day Martin Overman had died. The winery owner might still be charged as an accessory in the death of Shari Randall and the burglary of the Overmans' house, but, with the elimination of Baron in the case of Martin's murder, Nyles was left without any more leads.

Sarah Overman was less concerned about finding her husband's killer than Nyles was. Her anxiety had been aroused when Ronnie had gone missing, and she finally confessed to Nyles and Cloris that she had feared that her son might have been involved in Martin's death. She knew that the two of them didn't get along, and Martin's temper might have provoked Ronnie to attack his father in self-defense. After Nyles reassured her that Ronnie had not killed his father, despite the fact that it was only the young man's word that had convinced him, Sarah was ready to let her husband's death remain a mystery. "It might be a greater tragedy to reveal the culprit than to just let it go," she told Nyles.

Nyles knew she could be right, but leaving a crime unsolved bothered him. He was aware that it was his own ego that was at stake—and his worry about his own competence. He needed to prove that he was as sharp as he used to be. His awareness brought with it a feeling that he was being selfish—even neurotic—but he was mollified by the knowledge that Sheriff MacDonald would not give up pursuing Martin's killer either, so the investigation would continue with or without Nyles' participation and he wasn't doing any greater harm by continuing on his own.

But he still had no leads.

Cloris and Sarah had been trying to provide support to Max Weyland, the father of the woman who had committed suicide as a result of Martin's sexual predation. Sarah, whom Weyland had first treated with suspicion because she was Martin's widow, had finally convinced the grieving father that she and he were both victims of Martin's despicable behavior. Sarah had asked Max to come to Napa to visit in order to take his mind off his daughter's death, but he had refused, associating the wine region with the man who had caused him to lose his daughter. Sarah still felt that there must be something she could do to make up for the pain her husband had caused the man and, the tragedy that had happened to his daughter, and the two women had decided to return to Mountain View to talk to Max, again, and he had accepted their offer.

"Mind if I come along?" Nyles asked. The three of them were sitting in the living room of Sarah's house. All three of them were drinking wine. Nyles held a glass of expensive Cabernet, a wine for which he was growing an affinity, while the two women were drinking an equally expensive local Chardonnay. All the wines were from Martin and Sarah's extensive cellar.

Cloris looked at her husband with suspicion. "I can see your mind working, Nyles. "You're still looking for a suspect in Martin's murder and you think Max may be the one."

"I just want to spend more time with you," he answered, although he knew he was stretching the truth, which bothered him—although not enough to stop him from doing it. "The two of you have either been gone somewhere or I have, ever since we got here." He took a long sip of his wine. "But you have to admit that Max Weyland has a motive."

"Oh for God's sake, Nyles," Sarah said, frowning at him. "The poor man lost his daughter. Of course he hates Martin for what he did to her, but why wouldn't he? That doesn't make him a killer."



“He might find it easier to talk to another man,” Nyles said. He knew he was grasping at straws, even fabricating reasons. Did he really think Max Weyland was a suspect? Perhaps, but the truth was, he didn’t want to be left alone in Sarah’s house again and apart from Cloris. “Anyway, I don’t feel like staying here by myself anymore” he said, feeling better that he had gotten his real feelings out. “Maybe we could go to Sacramento afterward and you could introduce me to the *Women Fighting Back* group and I could look at their files. Max may not have killed Martin, but the idea that someone was getting revenge for his sexual predation isn’t so far-fetched.” He looked guiltily over at Sarah. “I hope it doesn’t bother you to talk about Martin this way.”

Sarah took a sip of wine then shook her head. “Martin was my husband, but he was abusive to me and his behavior in Sacramento was disgusting. As I told you and Cloris, I don’t want anyone else hurt and trying to track down some poor woman whom Martin abused seems like it will just stir up more problems.”

“Phil MacDonald will eventually start examining Martin’s victims. I can handle the investigating a lot more discreetly than he would—especially if he finds out about Max Weyland’s daughter.”

Sarah looked at him skeptically.

Cloris gazed at him with a stern expression. “I agree with Sarah that questioning Max would be wrong, “ she told her husband. “Sometimes your focus makes you forget what people are feeling” She took a deep breath. “I say we stop by to see Max, and Sarah and I will try to help him if we can—you can join in if you like, as long as you don’t question him about Martin’s murder—then we’ll head to Sacramento and you can take a look into the WFB files for any other leads.” She raised her eyebrows as if in question.

Nyles nodded. “Hands off Max. I get it.”

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Max Weyland lived on a short street, ending in a cul-de-sac in a suburban neighborhood of small, ranch-style houses. An elementary school was only one street away and a large park, bordered by a hospital, was three blocks in the other direction.

“This was the perfect place to raise a daughter,” Max told the three of them as they sat in his living room. The dining area, with a table and a hanging chandelier was at one end of the room, near a door leading to the kitchen, and at the other end of the room were French doors looking out onto a small lawn and a garden, surrounded by a stucco wall. The two women were seated on a velour couch and Nyles was on a matching loveseat, while Max was sitting in an easy chair, facing them. A big screen television was to his right, next to a brick fireplace, the bricks painted white.

“The grade school is one block over and the junior high and high school are less than a half mile away,” Max continued. “We bought this place before Janine was born. My wife was pregnant and we were looking for a place to raise a child. That was back when prices were affordable. I wouldn’t be able to buy anything in this neighborhood these days.”

“You’re retired?” Nyles asked.

“I’m on a leave of absence. I’ll go back to teaching. I just didn’t feel up to it after... after my daughter died.” His expression had saddened as he gazed out the French doors at the garden. The sun was shining brightly on the grass and flowers. The tan stucco wall looked almost white in the bright sunshine.

“What did you teach?” Nyles asked. He was trying to avoid questioning the man the way he would if he were still a cop, but that left him uncertain what to say. The two women hadn’t said anything, and he felt as if they were testing him to see if he could live up to his promise not to treat Max like a suspect.

Max swung his head back to look at Nyles, as if he’d forgotten that there were other people in the room. “Oh yes,” he said, smiling absently. “I taught world history at Los Altos High School.” He turned and gazed at the garden again.

Nyles looked helplessly at Cloris and Sarah. He felt as if he’d kept to his bargain and he knew they were better at this kind of small talk than he was.

“We’re interested in in your daughter,” Sarah said, finally jumping in to save him. “We thought it might help you to talk about her, although we don’t want to intrude or force you to talk about something painful.”

Nyles breathed easier now that Sarah had come to his rescue. He could see that Max needed support. His own questions about Martin’s murder could wait.

Max nodded, as if he were acknowledging the truth of Sarah’s statement. “Janine and I shared an interest in history,” he said. “She was an outstanding student. She wanted to learn everything she could about the world, about other cultures. At college, she met students from all different countries. She became interested in politics and international relations. She saw her fellowship in Sacramento as a steppingstone, really. Her ambition was to go to Washington... or to the U.N.” He looked at each one of them. Each of them was listening intently. Nyles could see the concerned looks in Cloris and Sarah’s eyes, even though they were both smiling.

“Her... episode...with your husband changed everything for her,” Max continued, turning back to Sarah. “She was very sheltered, sexually. She’d never even dated, not in high school nor in college.” He scanned their faces. “I’m not sure she was interested in men.” He stopped, as if not knowing how to continue.

“Was she close to other women?” Cloris asked.

“She had a couple of relationships. I think she became very emotionally involved.” He straightened up. “Janine was lesbian.” He shook his head. “I don’t know why I don’t just say it. She talked to me openly about it and I accepted who she was. I think that was one reason Senator Overman’s advances bothered her so much.”

“Did she continue to have close relationships with anyone after the episode with the senator?” Nyles asked. He wondered if being molested by a man had cut her off from any emotional attachment. He was already feeling very sad, not just for Max, but for the daughter he was learning about. Martin Overman had not just violated her, he had no doubt traumatized her.

Max turned to him, as if he was pleased that Nyles was interested. “She was withdrawn after she left Sacramento. She said she was going back to school for a Master’s degree, and she enrolled at Berkeley, but then she stayed home most of the time and skipped her classes. She finally dropped out. She never seemed to talk to anyone. I had no idea what was wrong, because she hadn’t told me what had happened. Then she got a job with a publisher of college textbooks in Palo Alto and started to make some friends. When I asked her about politics and international relations, she just said she wasn’t interested. Right after she dropped out of Berkeley, she took too many sleeping pills. In retrospect I guess it was a suicide attempt, but she denied it and at the time I went along, not wanting to believe it.” He stopped talking and looked down at the floor. “I really haven’t talked about this whole thing to anyone.”

“You don’t need to tell us anything you don’t want to tell us,” Cloris said. Sarah nodded in agreement.

He looked up. “It’s actually a relief to be able to talk to someone.” He shifted in his chair, then continued. “I still didn’t know what had happened in Sacramento—she never told me about it—but she seemed to be getting better after taking the job at *Ed. Tech.*, the publisher. She was living at home with me—just the two of us. My wife died when Janine was 13. She started to go out with some old friends from college. One of them was a... special friend. Everything seemed fine until they broke off their relationship about a year and a half ago. Then she had another overdose. This time she admitted that she’d tried to kill herself. She said it had nothing to do with breaking up with Vanessa—that’s her friend. But she wouldn’t tell me what it was about. She and Vanessa got back together again and I thought everything was fine until last month. Then out of the blue I went in to wake her for work and she wouldn’t wake up. I saw the pills next to her bed.” He stopped talking and his lower lip began to tremble. He brushed his hand across his eyes. “Sorry,” he said.

“That must have been terrible for you,” Sarah said. She looked as if she was near tears herself.

Max nodded. “I had no idea that she was still so depressed. I had to tell Vanessa of course and that’s when she told me about what happened with your husband... the senator. She said Janine had never been the same. She said Janine felt she’d been ruined... that she was unable to have a full relationship anymore.” He looked at Sarah. “Vanessa blamed everything on the episode with your husband. She said Janine never recovered from it.”

“I think Vanessa was the one who put the information in the WFB file,” Cloris said. “I remember that name attached to one of the files. I think she must have

wanted WFB—*Women Fighting Back*— to go after Martin. She probably didn't know that he had Alzheimer's or that he had retired."

"What's done is done," Max said, the sadness evident in his voice. "Nothing is going to bring my daughter back. Trying to get revenge would destroy me as much as losing Janine has. I guess Vanessa feels differently, but it's too late." He looked at Sarah. "Your husband is dead now too."

"Your loss is greater than mine," Sarah said, her voice starting to crack.

Nyles looked at the two people, both of whom had lost someone close to them. They were united in a strange way. Sarah blamed herself for Janine Weyland's death as much as the girl's father blamed himself. And of course Martin was the real culprit...something the woman named Vanessa understood. Nyles wondered how far Vanessa would have gone to get revenge on Martin. He wanted to find out more, but not from Max, who was too hurt for Nyles to pry into his life. *Women Fighting Back* would probably have information on Vanessa. If the young woman had been able to put material in their files, that might mean that she was a member. It was time to go to Sacramento.

## Chapter 36

On the drive to Sacramento, Cloris told Nyles and Sarah that she had called *Women Fighting Back*, and they would not let Nyles have access to their files. She explained to Nyles that they were a feminist group and some of their more strident members regarded men as their enemy. She and Sarah had gained their confidence and they would look through the files and find out who among Martin's victims—other than Vanessa—might be most likely to have taken out revenge on him. Both women were adamant that Nyles not pursue Vanessa. Such an investigation would only produce more pain, both for the woman who had been closest to Janine Weyland and for Max. Nyles reluctantly agreed.

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Nyles spent his time walking through Old Town Sacramento. He ignored the railroad ride and the boat cruise on the Sacramento River, which Old Town bordered, even though the Riverboat cruise looked interesting and he thought that a view of the city from the middle of the wide, muddy river might be quite picturesque. He'd forgotten that Sacramento was a jumping off spot for prospectors and adventurers during the gold rush. Riverboats plied the river and the delta, some of them coming up from San Francisco. He was tempted to give the riverboat cruise a try, but instead, he went into *Fanny Ann's Saloon*, which seemed to him to be a historic saloon that, unfortunately, had become a sports bar. He treated himself to one of Fanny Ann's "World Famous" burgers, choosing the one that included both a hamburger patty and pastrami as well as curly fries, then ordered a tall, 22 oz. beer. He had no idea how long Cloris and Sarah would be, so he texted them and told them where he was and settled in, hoping that he would have time for a second beer before the women arrived to pick him up.

Halfway through his second beer the two women arrived at the sports bar, having finished completed their investigation at the WFB offices. Nyles could tell by the look on their faces that Cloris and Sarah hadn't found anything definitive in the organization's files.

"There are lots of entries, which we saw before when we looked at Martin's file," Cloris began, "but none of them tell enough about the reaction of the women involved to point to one victim more than another. Janine Weyland has the most detailed description of her molestation of any of the women," she glanced over at Sarah, who had slid into the booth next to her. "What happened to the young woman really was a rape according to the documents in the file."

Sarah nodded. She looked around for a waitress or waiter. "I need a glass of wine. Do they serve wine in this place?" she asked with a skeptical expression on her face. She got a waitress' attention and ordered both herself and Cloris glasses of white wine. "I see you've reverted to beer," she said eyeing Nyles' 22 oz. glass. He didn't tell her that it was his second. "Vanessa Davis is the name attached to the pages describing Janine's molestation—and Cloris is right, what is described was a rape. The language is vicious, the description of the assault's effect on Janine mental health is frightening. The notes in the file clearly imply that Martin was to blame for her suicide. The file also says that the victim—Janine Weyland—didn't want the information to be made public. We were lucky they allowed us to see it and we had to promise not to divulge what we saw."

"Did you find out anything about Vanessa?" Nyles asked.

"She lives in Palo Alto, but her work brings her to Sacramento quite a lot," Cloris answered.



“Nyles...” Sarah began, a warning note in her voice, “...Vanessa Davis must be as devastated by Janine’s death as Max is. You already agreed you wouldn’t investigate her about Martin.”

Nyles returned Sarah’s gaze. “Yes, I did.”

“Good,” Sarah said. The women’s wines had come. The waitress asked if they wanted food, but both Sarah and Cloris declined. “Not here,” Sarah whispered to Nyles, eyeing the remains of his burger and fries.

“OK,” Nyles said, signaling the waitress for a bill. “How about I take you both to dinner and then we head back to Napa?”

Both women vigorously nodded their heads. Cloris unceremoniously pushed her half-full wine glass away and Sarah did the same. “I know just the place we’d like to go,” Cloris said.

## Chapter 37

As far as Nyles was concerned, Vanessa Davis had become the prime suspect in Martin Overman's murder. She had ample motive, given that her lover had committed suicide because of her rape at the hands of the senator. Janine Weyland's father also blamed Overman for his daughter's death, but, after talking to him, Nyles didn't think the man would have killed committed murder because of it. He was much more depressed than angry. Vanessa Davis was angry and vengeful enough to record her accusations against the senator in the records of WFB. She might have been angry enough to go even further. The problem was that Nyles had promised Cloris and Sarah that he wouldn't investigate Vanessa Davis as a suspect.

It wasn't like him to back off on an investigation, but Nyles reminded himself that he had no authority to investigate Martin Overman's murder in the first place. He'd become involved because of Sarah's request, although she had really only asked him to use his influence to convince his friend, Sheriff Phil MacDonald, to look further into her husband's death. After evidence was found that the senator had been assaulted in his home before being transported to a burning grove where he succumbed from smoke inhalation, the sheriff had reopened the case as a murder investigation. At that point, Nyles' obligation to Sarah had been fulfilled, and his role in finding out what happened to Martin should have been over.

Nyles' life had always been his work. He had no hobbies, no interests, except his wife's happiness and health, and as she recovered from her illness and became fully active again, he wasn't even needed to assist her. He could feel a dark cloud of depression descend upon him every time he found himself with nothing to do. And then there was his fear of developing Alzheimer's. He had become forgetful, inattentive to the details that were necessary to navigate his way through daily life—even on one occasion becoming lost while driving. He knew enough

about depression to know that such symptoms could be a consequence of his despondent mood, but he also knew that they could be the signs of incipient dementia. He needed the challenge of a case to raise his spirits and to test his mental acuity when he applied it to a real problem.

Following up the leads on Martin's murder had invigorated him, erased his depression, and reaffirmed his faith in his mental abilities.

And now he was having a hard time giving up the case. He didn't know if it was because of these personal reasons, or because his lifelong dedication to the law made it difficult for him to let a suspected murderer go free. He wasn't sure how Phil MacDonald would ever arrive at Vanessa Davis as a suspect—not unless Nyles told him about her, and that's just what he had promised Sarah and Cloris he wouldn't do.

His thoughts were interrupted by the buzz of his cell phone. It was Sheriff MacDonald.

"I think we've been going in the wrong direction on Overman's case," the sheriff announced.

"What do you mean?" Nyles could feel his eagerness mounting.

"It's pretty clear that David Stalworth and maybe even Gerald Baron were behind Eric Leavitt's harassment of both you and Shari Randall and also the robbery at Overman's house. You were right that they were trying to cover up their bribes to the senator. But none of them had anything to do with Overman's murder. Each of them has an alibi. It had to be someone else. My guess is that it may be connected to one of those women that Overman bragged about molesting in his memoir." He waited for Nyles to respond.

"You read Overman's memoir?"

"Stallworth turned over the copy that Ronnie Overman gave him."

“The memoir only mentions the women’s first names, if I remember it correctly.”

“That’s right,” MacDonald answered. “But didn’t you tell me that Sarah Overman was trying to locate some of the women in order to apologize to them or something? She might have found out who they are.”

Nyles felt his stomach tighten. “I don’t think she’s found any of them,” he said, knowing his answer a lie. Sarah hadn’t talked to any victims directly, but, because of WFB, she certainly knew some of their names, including Janine Weyland’s, and he, Sarah and Cloris had all talked to the deceased young woman’s father. “I don’t know for sure, but that’s what she told me last time we talked about it.”

“That’s too bad, but that’s the only direction I’ve got left in terms of looking for suspects,” MacDonald said. “I’ll talk to the State Capital Police and see if they have any information. Maybe some of the women filed reports on Overman. I’m sure I can find a way to identify who those women were.” He paused. “Have you got any other ideas? It’s been your leads that have given us Leavitt and Stallworth and Baron, so far.”

“It’s all in your hands, now,” Nyles answered. “I’ve run out of leads.”

“I’ll keep you informed,” MacDonald, said. “Oh, and you can tell Sarah that I’ll be giving her a call to find out for sure whether she learned anything about those women’s identities.”

When he hung up, Nyles looked down at his hand holding the cellphone and saw that it was slick with sweat. For the first time in his career, he’d covered up evidence... and to one of his closest law enforcement friends. He realized why he had done it. He hadn’t given up doing his own investigating.

Nyles and the two women had returned to Napa the morning after Cloris and Sarah had visited the WFB offices and then reported their findings to Nyles. While Nyles had been talking on his phone in the kitchen with Sheriff MacDonald, Cloris and Sarah were in the living room talking about what to do next in their campaign against male sexual predation. Sarah refused to talk any more about Vanessa Davis or her possible role in Martin's death. "I'm just not going to consider that she may have had something to do with Martin's murder," she'd told Cloris and Nyles. "It puts me in too much of a dilemma. I want Martin's murderer brought to justice, but I don't want to harm one more young woman than has already suffered. If it turns out that Vanessa Davis was involved, so be it, but I'm not going to be the one who helps find that out."

Nyles knew that, if Sarah talked to Phil MacDonald, she was going to have to face the same decision that he had when he'd talked to MacDonald... how much to tell the sheriff. He walked into the living room and sat down in a chair opposite Sarah and his wife, who were sitting close to each other on the couch. "Phil MacDonald is going to call you, Sarah. He's going to ask if you've found out who the women were that Martin talked about in his memoir. Phil thinks that one of those women may be the one who killed Martin. I told him I didn't think you had identified any of them, but he said he's going to call you anyway."

"Does he know about Janine Weyland?"

"He didn't mention her."

"Do I have to talk to him?"

"It would seem odd if you didn't. How much you tell him is up to you."

Sarah was silent.

"What are Phil's chances of learning about Janine?" Cloris asked.

Nyles had been wondering the same thing. “It depends upon his sources,” he answered. “If he only contacts police sources, probably he won’t learn anything, since there was never any official connection between the woman’s suicide and Martin. I assume she didn’t file a complaint with the police.”

Cloris glanced at Sarah. “I think she did—at least what Vanessa wrote in the WFB file said she did—but the police didn’t do anything. There were never any charges filed.”

Nyles thought about that. Even if no charges were filed, there would be a record of Janine’s accusation. “Then he’ll probably find out about it,” he told the two women.

Sarah had a faraway look on her face. She got up and went into the kitchen, then returned with a full glass of wine. As she set it on the coffee table, she look around, then started, as if she had forgotten that two other people were present. “I’m sorry, do either of you want a glass of wine?”

“I’ll get us both one,” Nyles answered. He realized he was aiding and abetting his wife’s drinking, but this situation was stressful for all of them. When he returned with two glasses of wine, Sarah and Cloris were huddled together on the couch, talking.

Sarah looked up at Nyles. “I don’t know what do. When I asked you to help, I wanted to find out the truth about how Martin died. Now I don’t know anymore. I don’t know Vanessa Davis—I certainly don’t know that she had anything to do with Martin’s death—but I know that she suffered a terrible loss because of my husband. Martin caused that young woman, Janine’s death, and Vanessa knew that. That doesn’t mean she killed Martin and you said yourself that whoever did kill him probably didn’t plan to do it; that things must have gotten out of hand. It

could even have been self-defense. Do I really want to say something to the sheriff that will totally disrupt that poor young woman's life, when she may be completely innocent?"

"Murder investigations do that," Nyles answered. He was thinking about how his own questions and his intrusion into the life of Shari Randall may have made her a target of her employers at the Wine Consortium... and gotten her killed. The thought made him hesitate to give Sarah any advice.

"That's no answer, Nyles," Cloris snapped, her irritation showing on her face. "Sarah is facing a real dilemma. We need to help her decide what to do."

His wife was right, but Nyles was wrestling with the same dilemma himself. "I've always worked on the assumption that finding out the truth was the best solution to any problem. We don't know whether Vanessa had anything to do with Martin's death, and we don't know whether Phil MacDonald will ever view her as a suspect, although I'm pretty sure he'll learn about Janine Weyland. We've gone this far in figuring out what actually happened to Martin that morning, I say we go further and find out for ourselves whether Vanessa had anything to do with it. Then we can decide what to do with what we've found out."

Sarah's face showed her uncertainty. "I'd really like to know. But I don't want anyone else to be hurt. Martin hurt enough women when he was alive, I don't want the investigation of his death to hurt more women."

"That may be out of our hands," Nyles answered. "I'm an investigator and I feel uncomfortable coming this far and then just letting things go without finding out the truth. You're Martin's wife, don't you feel the same way?"

"I do, but what do we do if she did kill Martin?"

“We’ll have to cross that bridge when we come to it,” Nyles answered, although he knew that he’d wouldn’t be able to lie to Phil MacDonald again—not if he knew who the killer was.

“How would you find out if Vanessa is the one who killed Martin?” Cloris asked.

“I have a plan.”



## Chapter 38

The three of them sat around the kitchen table, eating sandwiches and macaroni salad, which Sarah had picked up at from the deli in Napa's Oxbow Public Market. Each of them had a glass of wine, Nyles his customary Cabernet and the two women their usual Chardonnay.

"We need to get Vanessa Davis to come here," Nyles said.

"Why?" Sarah asked.

"So we can get a sample of her fingerprints."

"Why would she come here?" Cloris asked. "If she did kill Martin, then she's not going to want to return to the scene of the crime."

"You'd be surprised," Nyles answered. "It's usually easy to get a murderer to come back to where the murder occurred. It's as if they want to make sure they didn't leave any clues behind. Their curiosity gets the best of them."

Cloris looked skeptical. "You mean it's really true that a murderer always returns to the scene of his crime?"

"Not always, but more often than you'd think."

"We still don't know if this woman did anything," Sarah interrupted them. "You're both talking about her as if she's a murderer, but we don't know that. Suppose she's innocent and I'm asking her to come to the house of the man who raped her lover and caused her to commit suicide. Why would she do that?"

"You're right, but I have an idea about how to get her here," Nyles answered.

The two women looked at each other. “How?” Sarah asked him.

“You’ve gained the confidence of *Women Fighting Back*; they’ve let you look through their files. You can tell them that you’ve found more evidence of Martin’s predatory behavior—cases that aren’t in his file—the ones he talked about in his memoir. You’ll have to tell them you can’t travel to Sacramento but you’d like the woman who worked on Martin’s file to come to Napa to listen to the memoir, which you can say is in some form that it can’t be sent—and old fashioned tape recording or something.”

“You mean she should lie,” Cloris said flatly. She looked over at Sarah

“It’s not really a lie,” he answered. “I’m sure that some of the women Martin mentioned in his memoir aren’t included in his file.”

Sarah looked from one of them to the other, as if she were weighing their points of view. “And you think Vanessa will come?” she asked. “...to the very house in which she killed someone—if she’s the one who did it?”

“I don’t know. It’s worth a try.”

“How will you get her fingerprints?” Cloris asked, the skepticism evident in her voice.

He smiled. “Serve her wine,” he said, holding up his glass.

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Neither Cloris nor Sarah had given him an answer right away. He knew Cloris was uncomfortable with the plan, especially since it involved having Sarah lie to WFB, although his wife didn’t seem to mind him lying to Sheriff MacDonald. Surprisingly to Nyles, Sarah had seemed amenable to the plan. Despite her sympathy for Janine Weyland’s lover, she still had a strong desire to find out who killed her husband. The two of them had shooed him out of the

room and huddled together over more wine. Finally, they both had called him back into the kitchen, where they were still sitting at the table, and told him they would do it.

The plan had worked. Sarah had made the call to the WFB office and had offered to contact the women who had compiled the files on Martin. After an hour, Director of WFB called back, she said that Vanessa Davis and another woman named Olivia Swanson, who had worked on Martin's files with her, had agreed to come to Napa to listen to the memoir. They would arrive the next day.

“Do you want to talk to them?” Sarah asked. He told her that he thought Cloris and Sarah should interview the two ladies. There would be some explaining to do when it turned out the memoir was on a computer and could be printed out, but Sarah could say that WFB had misunderstood what she'd told them about it and that she'd meant Martin had dictated into a tape before it was typed by his secretary. She could also explain that other people had tried to steal the memoir so she didn't want it out of her sight. Essentially, he told them to tell Vanessa and the other woman the truth about the memoir and how many people had tried to gain possession of it and to let them read the parts about Martin's predations on women themselves so they would believe that Sarah's interest in turning it over to them was authentic. Nyles would be in the house and he would listen to their conversation from another room, but most importantly, he would collect some article—probably a wine glass—to obtain Vanessa's fingerprints.

Sarah and Cloris agreed to the plan.

## Chapter 39

Vanessa Davis's nervousness was apparent when, along with her friend, Olivia Swanson, she entered Sarah's house. Neither woman smiled nor responded warmly to Sarah's friendly greeting. Sarah showed them into the living room, where Cloris was waiting on the couch. Nyles was in the kitchen, acting as though he was preparing himself something to eat, but he could see the women pass by, and Sarah introduced him as Cloris' husband, mentioning that he would not be joining them.

The women's youthful appearance surprised him. He reminded himself that Vanessa had been a college classmate of Janine Weyland, who was 28 years old when she died, so Vanessa was probably the same age. Olivia looked about the same age. Vanessa was dressed in a casual skirt and blouse and wore a pair of low heels. Her hair was blonde and curled down to her shoulders. She was an attractive looking young woman with a serious, intent look on her face. She didn't smile when she was introduced to Nyles. Her partner, Olivia was dressed more casually in a pair of jeans and a man's shirt. She had short brown hair and wore no makeup. She nodded brusquely as she passed the kitchen door and was introduced to him.

Nyles wanted to be far enough away that the women would feel free to talk, but he also wanted to be able to hear what was being said. He took his sandwich down the hallway and into Martin's study, leaving the door to the hallway open after he entered the room. He could hear the women's voices distinctly.

The two women's nervousness turned out to be fortunate, because they both accepted the offer of wine from Sarah. Despite the collegiality of drinking wine and nibbling on the cheeses

that Sarah had also provided, both women voiced suspicion about why Sarah would share information with them that would incriminate her husband. She explained that she, herself, had been a victim of her husband's abuse, but she hadn't known about his sexually predatory behavior toward other women until she found out about his memoir. She and Cloris, who was involved with a group fighting sexual predation in Hollywood, traveled to Sacramento and read the files that WFB had on Martin. They realized that those files contained some stories that were not in Martin's memoir, but they also had missed many of the victims he had talked about in that document. Sarah explained that she felt guilty about keeping her head buried in the sand about her husband's behavior and allowing so many women to be hurt by it. She was trying to rectify the situation, now, as much as she could.

"How can you help anyone now?" one of the women asked, her tone hostile. Nyles thought the speaker was the woman named Olivia, although he wasn't sure.

"I'm not sure," Sarah said. "That's why I want *Women Fighting Back* to know about these incidents. Perhaps they can do something or tell me if I can help in any way... perhaps make restitution of some sort for the damage Martin caused."

"It's a little late for that," the woman answered. Nyles could hear the hostility in her voice.

"We'd be interested in learning what's in your husband's memoir, though," the other woman—Nyles assumed it was Vanessa—said, in a gentler voice.

Sarah explained her husband's memoir and the circumstances surrounding it, particularly Martin's dementia and that he had dictated the document to a secretary. She told the two younger

women that her husband's mental disease had led him to talk about things he had previously kept secret, including his predation on a number of women in Sacramento.

Vanessa, in particular, sounded shocked to find out that Martin suffered from dementia. "Alzheimer's? Your husband didn't know what he was doing, anymore?" she asked. Her voice seemed to Nyles to express a feeling of horror. "Even on the day he died?"

"He could conceal it for a few moments, but he was easily confused; he didn't remember things from one moment to another, and he was very impulsive," Sarah answered.

"What do you mean, he was impulsive?" Vanessa asked, the horror still apparent in her tone.

"He tended to lose his temper easily," Sarah answered.

"But the crimes he committed toward those women were all real," the other woman, interrupted. Her own voice sounded as if she was more angry than horrified. "What he said in the memoir really happened, didn't it?"

"Absolutely," Sarah answered. "My husband's memory for the past was more or less intact. I have a list of the women and what he said about each one, although he only used their first names." There was a pause and Nyles imagined that she was handing the lists she had made to the other women.

"I thought the so-called memoir wasn't in a form that could be copied," Olivia, said, her voice edged with suspicion.

"Martin dictated the memoir, but it was typed on a computer. I couldn't send it because there has been a burglary and even a murder related to it. There are people who didn't want the memoir to be published."

“Did you say a murder?” Vanessa asked.

“The secretary who typed it for Martin was killed.”

“By whom?”

“The memoir contained some information on bribes my husband had taken and the people who made those bribes wanted it destroyed. They tried to run the secretary who typed it off the road—to scare her, I think—and she died.”

“So they were going to destroy your husband’s admissions about molesting women?”

The voice was Olivia’s, who sounded angry.

“I don’t think they cared about whether or not he molested anyone. They were trying to protect their own interests.” Nyles recognized Cloris’ voice.

“Have they been caught?” Vanessa asked.

“Two of them are in jail, one is out on bail.” Cloris answered. “My husband, whom you saw in the kitchen when you came in, is a former detective. He caught them.” Nyles could hear the pride in Cloris’ voice, although he was not sure it was wise of her to let the two women know that he was a detective.

“And one of them is still free?” Olivia asked. Her tone was icy.

“He’s a very powerful man,” Sarah answered. “He had other people do his dirty work.”

“And he evidently didn’t care that this memoir contained information on your husband’s molestations.” Olivia continued, the anger still present in her voice. “He was only looking out for himself. And now he’s free.”

“Just on bail,” Cloris said. “He’ll still be prosecuted.”

“But not for trying to bury the evidence of all those women your husband ruined with his behavior,” Olivia countered. “He’s almost as guilty as your husband.”

“Who is this man?” Olivia asked

“His name is Gerald Baron.” Cloris answered. “He owns Baron wineries. He’s powerful, but my husband says there’s enough evidence to convict him, though probably not for murder.”

“Did you say your husband was a detective?” Vanessa asked, presumably addressing Cloris.

“A former detective—in Los Angeles.”

““But he worked on a case up here?”

“He was looking into Sarah’s husband’s death and the attempt to steal the memoir... just as a favor, nothing else.” It sounded to Nyles as if Cloris had realized that she may have said too much.

“He’s investigating Senator Overman’s death?” Vanessa asked. Nyles thought he could hear fear in her voice.

“Not any more. The sheriff is handling that now,” Cloris answered.

“I thought I read that your Senator Overman died in the fires.”

“That’s true,” Sarah answered, “but the sheriff has determined that he was murdered.”

There was a long moment of silence.

“You didn’t really need us to come here, did you?” Olivia asked.

“What do you mean?” Sarah queried.



“You could have sent us this paper with the names and circumstances of your husband’s victims,” Olivia continued. “You wanted us to come here—to your house. Why?”

“I told you that I didn’t want this material to be stolen again?”

“You know that doesn’t make sense. You’d still have it, even if you sent us a copy,” Olivia persisted.

“I wanted to meet you and give it to you in person,” Sarah said. “I wanted you to know how sincere I am in wanting to help my husband’s victims.”

“You’ve done that,” Olivia said. Nyles could hear the rustling sounds of the women standing up and getting ready to leave. “We’ll take our copies. We’re done here Vanessa, aren’t we?”

“Thank you,” Vanessa said. Her own voice had gained a hard edge to it. “And thank you for telling us about another predator.”

“What do you mean, another predator?” Sarah asked, sounding confused.

“This Mr. Baron you talked about. The man could be responsible for a woman’s death but, according to you, may go free and who didn’t care about the women your husband molested. He was willing to get rid of all of this evidence you’ve given us—maybe willing to kill to do it. He’s just as guilty as your husband.”

Nyles listened as the two young women left the house. He went out to the living room.

“I think I scared them by saying you were a detective,” Cloris said, looking guiltily at Nyles.

He had his eye on the coffee table, where four wine glasses sat, all of them empty. “Don't worry about that. I see they took the wine. I hope you remember whose glass is whose.”

“Absolutely,” Cloris said, regaining her confidence. “I'm not married to a detective for nothing.”

## Chapter 40

“We’ve got a match,” Sheriff Phil MacDonald told Nyles, who was sitting opposite his desk in his office. Nyles had delivered the two wine glasses to the sheriff’s department and it was only a matter of a half hour or so before the news was delivered to MacDonald about the match. “Whoever picked up that wineglass was the same person who handled the vase that was used to strike Martin Overman on the head. Now are you going to tell me whose prints they are?” It was Olivia Swanson’s glass that had held the matching fingerprints.

Nyles wasn’t sure if he was relieved or distressed. He had talked the situation over with Sarah and Cloris, and all three of them had finally agreed that he had to see if either of the women’s prints matched those of Martin’s killer. If they didn’t he needn’t tell the sheriff where he’d gotten them or from who. But if there was a match, he couldn’t withhold evidence. He would have to reveal their identities.

He told the sheriff about the two women and their relationship to Senator Overman through the suicide of Janine Weyland, one of the senator’s victims.

“You did a hell of a job finding those two women and getting their prints,” MacDonald told him. “I would have never thought of looking through the records of . . . what was the name of that group?”

“*Women Fighting Back*. You can thank Sarah and Cloris for contacting them, and actually for getting those fingerprints. Sarah feels bad about Martin’s behavior toward women and she was trying to find victims of his that she could help in some way.”

“But none of you felt any need to tell me about what she and your wife had found.” MacDonald scowled at him across the desk. “In fact, you told me that they hadn’t found anything.”

He was right, and Nyles still felt bad about having lied to his old friend, but he also thought he’d done the right thing. “We didn’t know if either of these women had anything to do with Martin’s death and Sarah, in particular, didn’t want to cause them any more stress than they—particularly Vanessa Davis—already felt after losing her close friend because of Martin. As soon as your analysis told us that the prints were from the same person who killed the senator, I told you what we knew about them.”

MacDonald stared at him across the desk. “So now you’ve told me everything, then?”

“Everything,” he answered, even though there was one more thing that Nyles had not told his friend about. The two women’s focus on Gerald Baron after they’d heard about his efforts to try to destroy the memoir and his possible role in Shari Randall’s death had troubled Nyles. Although it probably meant nothing, he was still wondering what, if anything, he should do about it. He’d decided not to tell MacDonald about it, so the sheriff could concentrate on apprehending the women. “There is one more thing, though,” he said.

MacDonald looked at him questioningly.

“I think Cloris and Sarah want you to go easy on them when you find them. Martin was a bastard and those two women had good reason to be angry with him. Both Sarah and Cloris feel guilty about providing evidence against Davis and Swanson.”

MacDonald’s face showed his surprise. “But this is Martin’s killer.”

“They probably didn’t plan to kill him and he was responsible for their friend’s death. Just be careful with them when you apprehend them.”

MacDonald stood up and stuck out his hand. “We know what we’re doing, Nyles.”

“Of course you do.”

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Cloris and Sarah were both troubled by their role in identifying Vanessa and Olivia as the killers. They were worried that they would need to testify against them in court, particularly about the fingerprints on the wine glasses, but Nyles told them that, despite those prints being instrumental in identifying them as Martin’s killers, the sheriff’s department would fingerprint them again after their arrest and use those prints to charge them with the murder... assuming they denied doing it. Nyles’ assurances didn’t mollify his wife or Sarah, because they both felt guilty, as though, by finding his killers, they themselves had become complicit in Martin’s misdeeds. Sarah wondered aloud whether Martin hadn’t prompted Olivia hitting him with the vase by becoming aggressive himself, something she was well aware he was prone to do.

“That’s something for their lawyers to figure out and present a case to a jury,” Nyles told Sarah. “They won’t get off, but they could get a lesser charge if knocking Martin unconscious with the vase was an act of self-defense. Of course transporting his body to the area where the fire was burning wasn’t an accident, and it’s complicated by the fact that Martin was still alive. Martin was a scoundrel, but that doesn’t allow someone to take the law into her own hands to make him pay for it.”

“They seemed almost as upset about Mr. Baron, when we brought him up,” Cloris said.

She was right, and he was still thinking about it. Both women had reacted in the extreme when they heard that Gerald Baron had ignored Martin's confessions about victimizing women and that Baron might have gone so far as to be involved in a murder in order to keep the information in the memoir from being revealed. Nyles felt a sense of dread. His intuition told him that the women's anger might not have been idle. "It's probably a good thing that they don't know where Gerald Baron lives," he said to Cloris, jokingly, although he knew that he meant it seriously.

"They'd certainly be able to find his winery," Cloris answered. "There are signs with his name on them all over the county, inviting people to visit the 'winery of the future,' as he calls it."

Nyles hadn't realized that Baron had referred to his winery in that way, but it certainly fit the ultra-modern design of his center and tasting room. He did recall seeing the signs scattered around the county. "I might just go visit the winery," he told his wife.

"Do you think they'd go there? Go after Mr. Baron?"

"I very much doubt it, but I'd feel terrible if they did and I didn't do something about it."

"You could call Phil MacDonald," Cloris reminded him.

He nodded. "I could," he said, remembering that he had deliberately not told MacDonald about his worries about the women going after Baron. Was that so that he could still be involved in the case? He dismissed the thought. "Maybe I'll just drive over and take a look at the place myself. Make sure Baron isn't there... or that the women aren't."

Cloris smiled and shook her head. "You mean you can't stay away from the case. As I always tell you, be careful."

“I always am.”

## Chapter 41

Nyles regretted that he hadn't noticed the make and color of the car the two women had been driving when they'd visited Sarah's house. The parking lot at Baron Winery was half full, but he didn't have a clue whether Vanessa's and Olivia's car was one of those in it. He answered the query of the greeter at the door with the information that he didn't have a reservation but that he was an acquaintance of Gerald Baron and had an urgent message for him. He said he was sure that Mr. Baron would want to see him. He gave the woman his name, and while he waited for her to return from wherever she'd gone to see if Baron was in, he stuck his head inside the main tasting room. The women he was looking for were nowhere to be seen.

Baron was in, and Nyles listened to the greeter's directions, then took the elevator to the down to the next floor. Baron's office was around the corner from the hallway on which the restaurant was located and where Nyles had seen Baron and Eric Leavitt talking when he had visited the winery before. When he rounded the corner, he saw that Baron was heading down the hall toward him.

"What's so urgent?" Baron asked, a frown on his face. "Haven't you caused me enough trouble already?"

Nyles asked him if they could go to his office. Baron hesitated. "This had better be important. I've lots to do here and now I have to prepare for a trial."

"That's hardly my fault," Nyles answered.

Baron gave him a sideways look that suggested that he didn't agree, then he ushered Nyles into a plush office, which contained a wide cherry desk, pictures of vineyards and European country houses on the walls, and bottles of Baron wines in glass cases, each sitting on



top of a pedestal in front of a wide picture window on one side of the room. Baron sat down behind his desk and Nyles took a leather chair opposite. “So what is it?” Baron asked.

Nyles told him about the two women who had killed Martin and who might be after him.

“After me? Why in the world would they be after me?”

“They know that you tried to destroy Martin’s memoir, and that it had information about his sexual molestations in Sacramento in it.”

“I paid no attention to that. It was just Overman bragging about his sexual conquests.”

“More his sexual molestations,” Nyles answered. “They believe you were trying to destroy the evidence, and if you didn't consider it important, that’s all the more damning, in their minds.”

Baron shook his head. “How did they get my name?”

“It doesn’t matter how they got your name. They’re mad as hell. They see you as part of some bigger scheme involving men covering up for each other.”

“I told you I didn’t even pay attention to that part of the memoir. Why would I give a rat’s ass about what Martin did to a bunch of bimbos in Sacramento? It has nothing to do with me.”

If Vanessa and Olivia heard Baron’s words, they certainly would come after him, Nyles thought to himself. “I’m not sure whether they’re after you or not. I’m just trying to warn you. Have your staff keep an eye out for a couple of young women—late twenties, early thirties—traveling together and who might make inquiries about you.”

“Why are you warning me instead of the sheriff?”

“The sheriff is looking for the two women, but I don’t think the sheriff he’d take the threat to you seriously.”

“But you do.”

“I don’t want to take any chances.”

“Awfully considerate of you, Monahan. Why are you so worried about me?”

“I’m not,” Nyles answered. “I don’t want to see those two women get themselves into any more trouble.”

“You’re protecting them? Didn’t you say their murderers?”

“I said they killed Senator Overman. Whether they’re murders is less clear. Anyway, it’s most likely nothing, but put your staff on alert. Call the sheriff if you see them here. I can give a description to the woman at the door.”

“OK,” Baron said, standing. “I’ll get several of the staff together and you can give them—and me— a description.”

They left the office and headed to the elevator. The lights indicate that it was coming up from the basement floor.

“You can tell some of the storage facility workers, that’s who’d be coming up from the bottom floor,” Baron said. “I doubt that anyone would go down there, but they might as well be alerted.

The doors slid open and Nyles was surprised to see Vanessa Davis and Olivia Swanson standing facing him in the elevator. He wasn’t sure they recognized him, but they seemed to recognize Baron.

“Mr. Baron?” Vanessa said.

Nyles stepped in front of Baron and confronted the two women. “You don’t need to talk to Mr. Baron. Remember me from Sarah Overman’s house? My wife talked to you. I’m a detective. I took a fingerprint from your glass that identified you as the ones who killed Senator Overman.”

Olivia pulled a gun from her purse. “I remember you.” She narrowed her eyes as she stared at Nyles. She pointed the gun at both of the men. “Now I know why your wife and Mrs. Overman invited us to her house. That was a trap to get our fingerprints, wasn’t it?”

Nyles was surprised by the gun. The two women’s plan was more deliberate than he had suspected. “Those prints confirm that you killed Senator Overman,” Nyles answered. “The sheriff wants to talk to the two of you.”

Vanessa looked as if she wanted to say something, but Olivia shook her head. “The senator had it coming,” Olivia said. “Now the two of you step into the elevator. We’re going back down to the bottom floor.” She stepped to the side so she could point the gun at both Nyles and Baron, who looked as if he was considering running. “Don’t even think about it Mr. Baron,” she said. “Step all the way inside the elevator.”

Baron looked as if he were still thinking about running... or maybe even trying to overpower the women. Nyles was afraid the winery owner would force the women to do something they would regret. “Do what they say,” he said, gripping Baron by the arm.

Baron obeyed. Fear showed on his face. Vanessa pushed the button for the bottom floor while Olivia kept the gun trained on Nyles and Baron. They arrived at the bottom floor and Olivia stepped out. “Step outside the elevator,” she told the two men.

Vanessa held the button so the door remained open, then stepped out after Nyles and Baron. They were in a large room, filled mostly with metal barrels, stacked on racks. On one side of the vast room there were several racks of wooden barrels. At the end of the room were large sliding doors, which were shut. Nyles imagined they were for moving the wine in and out of the storage room.

“You have an impressive winery, Mr. Baron,” Olivia said. They had all taken a few steps into the room, and Nyles and Baron were facing the two women, both of whom had grim looks on their faces.

“You seem to have everything, yet, according to Mr. Monahan’s wife, you killed a woman just to protect yourself,” Vanessa said. Her face was twisted in anger, as if Baron had assaulted her, personally. “Is that right?”

“The woman in question was killed in an auto accident. No one tried to kill her, least of all me. She was drunk and she drove off the road. My lawyers assure me I will be found innocent of any wrongdoing.”

Nyles wondered if Baron believed what he was saying or if he was just trying to prove his innocence to the two women who held him at gunpoint.

“Men like you always have lawyers to get them off,” Vanessa said. “You and Senator Overman are just alike.”

Baron looked over at Nyles, as if hoping for help.

Nyles’ mind was racing, trying to figure out what would deter the two women from making a fatal move. “Senator Overman assaulted your friend,” he said, looking at Vanessa.

“That resulted in her taking her own life. What the senator did was a crime that he should have had to pay for, but, you’re right, he was too powerful and he didn’t have to pay.”

“Until we visited him,” Olivia said.

Vanessa turned to her friend. Her face now held a look of fear. “That was an accident, Olivia. He attacked us.”

“He attacked you physically?” Nyles asked.

“He slapped me and knocked me down. He was in a rage,” Vanessa answered. “We accused him of raping Janine. He just went berserk. Olivia had no choice but to hit him in order to protect us both.”

Nyles remembered that Ronnie Overman had said that he’d had to physically intervene with his father for his mother’s safety on more than one occasion. The women’s story was plausible. “Did you think you’d killed him?” He asked, looking first at one then the other woman.

“We didn’t go there to kill him,” Vanessa said. “We only wanted to confront him with what he had done to Janine. We threatened to make it public. We didn’t know he would react violently.”

“We didn’t know he had dementia,” Olivia said. Her own anger seemed to have subsided. “Killing him was an accident.” She too sounded afraid.

“He wasn’t dead,” Nyles said. “Not when you moved him to the fire area. He died there... of asphyxiation.”

Both women’s faces showed their shock. “Oh my God!” Vanessa exclaimed. “You mean he didn’t die from being hit?” She looked at Olivia in panic. “What did we do?”

Olivia's face resumed its hardened expression. "It doesn't matter anymore. He's dead and he deserved it. He killed the person you loved, and he ruined the lives of many other women."

"It matters that it's not first degree murder," Nyles said. He was talking to Vanessa more than Olivia as the former seemed more amenable to reason. "Just like Mr. Baron here, you didn't mean to kill anyone. But if you kill him... or us, it will be deliberate. That's a very different thing, as far as the law is concerned."

Olivia looked over at Vanessa. Her expression was stony. "We've gone too far. This man's a murderer himself."

"What about Mr. Monahan?" Vanessa asked, looking at her friend in confusion. "What has he done?"

"He shouldn't have gotten involved," Olivia said, staring at Nyles. Her expression was like stone.

"We're not killers, Olivia," Vanessa said. She sounded as if she might cry, but her expression was determined. "We never meant to kill Senator Overman and we haven't hurt anyone else. We need to stop. Give Mr. Monahan the gun."

The other woman looked uncertain. Nyles held out his hand. Olivia looked back at Vanessa. "You're right" she said, then she held out the gun.

Before Nyles could take the gun, Baron grabbed it. He pointed it at Olivia. His face was livid. "You two foolish women almost killed me!" he shouted. "Do you know who I am? This is my property you're on—my property on which you are trespassing." He waved the gun back and forth between the two of them.

“And you’re already a murderer,” Olivia said. She didn't look frightened. Vanessa also appeared unafraid.

Perhaps they both wanted to end it all, Nyles thought. He wasn't going to let that happen. “You might not be a murderer, Mr. Baron,” he said to the winery owner, who was now pointing the gun at him. “We’ve been through this before. As you said, your lawyers may be able to get you off, or at least get you a minimal sentence. But if you kill anyone else, even if you make it appear justified, you’ll ruin your claim of innocence. And remember that I’m a witness. You’d have to kill me too.”

Baron stared at him. Then he lowered the gun. “Always the voice of reason, Mr. Monahan. You’re right of course.” He looked over at Vanessa and Olivia. “You know he came here to protect you? That’s what he told me. He was afraid you’d try to harm me and he didn’t want you to get into more trouble.”

“And it looks as though he’s saved you from the same thing,” Vanessa said. She looked over at Nyles and flashed him a brief smile. “Thank you,” she said to him.

## Chapter 42

Sheriff Phil MacDonald was perplexed and irritated that Nyles had found the two suspects in Martin Overman's murder—the suspects that his department had been looking for—and that he had almost been killed in the process. “I told you to let us handle this,” MacDonald muttered, popping two candies into his mouth at once.

“It was only a hunch that those women would show up at Baron's winery,” Nyles said. He was sitting opposite MacDonald's desk again, watching his friend chew the candies with a vengeance. “It was such an outside chance, that I didn't want to waste your department's time.”

MacDonald's expression was dubious. “Just like tracking down Baron in Mendocino. Another long shot that you didn't want to bother us with, most of your long shots seemed to have paid off.”

“I was lucky,” Nyles said, grinning. “I'm a lucky Irishman.”

“You've never relied on luck, you bugger, you and I both know it.”

Nyles shrugged. “Anyway, we've tied up all the loose ends, I think.” He looked across at his friend. “You know it's weird that none of the deaths was actually planned—not Martin's and not Shari Randall's. Those women just wanted to confront Martin with his crimes and Baron and Leavitt just wanted to scare Shari Randall.”

MacDonald nodded. “But we still have two dead people. And their killers are going to be charged with murder.”

“Baron's lawyers will probably get him off. He was right about that. Or at least he won't get the book thrown at him. He's still got power in this county. The two women are another



story. They're nobody. But I'm willing to bet that Sarah Overman will do whatever she can to help them. She'll find them a top lawyer."

"Even though they killed her husband?"

"I'm pretty sure that's what will happen," Nyles said.

"We'll see," MacDonald answered.

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"I'm going to do what I can to help those two poor girls," Sarah told Nyles and Cloris as they sat in the living room drinking wine and discussing the strange events of the last several weeks.

"Gerald Baron isn't pressing charges against them for threatening him with a gun," Nyles said. "I convinced him that it would only muddy his case because it would suggest one more reason why he wanted to get rid of Martin's memoir—this time to get rid of the evidence of Martin's assaults on women—and it could bias his case with a female judge or jury member. Without a complaint, Phil MacDonald won't file charges on their threat to Baron either. It's only Martin's death that the two women will stand trial for."

Sarah was gazing at the floor. "I still feel responsible for some of this. I just stuck my head in the sand about Martin's behavior with other women. And if I'd listened to Ronnie, I'd have put Martin someplace where his angry outbursts couldn't hurt anyone. Those two girls were defending themselves and I know exactly how they felt."

"None of this is your fault," Cloris said, reaching over and putting her hand on her friend's arm. "What could you have done about Martin's behavior? He was away in Sacramento. You couldn't watch him 24-7. And you know you were trying to do the best for him by keeping

him at home. Doctor Selfridge didn't think he needed to be put in a nursing home at the stage he was at with his disease."

Sarah took a long sip of her wine. "I still feel terrible about all of this."

"There were tragedies all around," Nyles said. "Think about poor Shari Randall. Martin wasn't the only one at fault in what went on. Baron and Stalworth and Eric Leavitt all did their part." He didn't mention her son Ronnie. "What you can do is testify regarding Martin's volatile temper and his attacks on you, which were part of his Alzheimer's. That will make it plausible that the two women felt they had to defend themselves. Ronnie may even be able to testify about that also, since he can verify that Martin's behavior sometimes required physical intervention."

"Do you think they can get off?" Cloris asked.

"Not completely. If the blow with the vase had killed Martin and they'd called 911, they would probably not be charged. They could prove it was self-defense. But since they moved him to the fire area where he died of asphyxiation, they'll be charged with something. I think Phil MacDonald is trying to talk to the DA about reducing the charge. I'm pretty sure it won't be first degree murder."

Sarah looked over at Nyles. "Thank you, Nyles for all you did."

Nyles nodded, although he wasn't sure that everything he'd done had been truly helpful. If he hadn't turned Martin Overman's death into a murder investigation, neither Vanessa Davis nor Olivia Swanson would be in jail charged with the crime. Perhaps Shari Randall would still be alive, since it was his digging around that had made the Wine Consortium people want to scare her into not talking to him. He took a long sip of his wine. Solving murders was only satisfying on a cognitive level, he thought. There was always a human cost, because there was always a

human story behind the crime. Martin Overman's murder was not the first time that discovering the killer meant causing a tragedy nearly as devastating as the crime itself, but Nyles knew that finding a killer was what he did. He couldn't let his emotions overrule his dedication to bringing out the truth.

At least he felt better about his mental faculties. In terms of problem solving of the kind required to solve a crime, he might be retired and he might be older, but he was pretty sure he hadn't lost a step. He took a long sip of his Cabernet. And he'd acquired a new taste for wine.

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