

The background of the book cover is a painting of a river scene. In the foreground, a river flows, its surface reflecting the sky and the surrounding landscape. A small figure of a person is visible on the right bank. In the middle ground, a house with a red roof is nestled among trees. The background shows rolling hills under a blue sky. The overall style is impressionistic, with visible brushstrokes and a soft, atmospheric quality.

The
EARLY
and
LATTER
RAIN

— — — — —
STEPHEN PARRISH

The Early and Latter Rain

The Early and Latter Rain

a novel

Stephen Parrish



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for Iris Peter (1974-1994)
And for Sarah

*Behold, the husbandman waiteth for the precious
fruit of the earth, and hath long patience for it,
until he receive the early and latter rain.*

—James 5:7

Chapter One

Christian Zorn could just see the monument from the prison superintendent's window. He found it ironic that a juvenile detention facility had been built on the site of a former Japanese internment camp. Perceive a danger, lock it up.

Next to the monument, a patch of sunflowers arrayed itself in rows of expressionless faces, all staring transfixed at the sun. The marker itself was an abstract hunk of concrete, unoriginal, and irrelevant in material or design to what happened there in the 1940s. As far as that went, the sunflowers made a more fitting memorial.

"Your counselor tells me you don't talk much," the superintendent said.

Christian looked at the man's tie. At the pencil holder on his desk, the pencils all sharpened to a fine point. At a cheap paper-weight resting on nothing, preventing nothing from floating away in the window breeze fanning the man's desk. He looked everywhere but into the superintendent's eyes. The staff couldn't read minds, but they had an uncanny ability to read eyes.

"I have little to say," Christian said.

"To us, or to anyone?"

Christian looked out the window again. The boys' barracks rose above the foundations of the old internment compound, the

Harvey Bishop Assembly Center. It was now called The Corners, because they had to erase its history, and its name, and no one could come up with a better replacement.

First came the Native Americans, then the Mexicans, then Harvey Bishop. Then the Japanese, and finally the juvenile delinquents. Sometimes when Christian sifted through the dirt in the parade field he found remnants of the Japanese camp: eroded chunks of red clay brick or glazed shards of tile.

“To you,” he said to the superintendent.

Michael Ramirez, whom the boys nicknamed Mickey, was no different from the rest of them. Maybe thinner around the waist. Better teeth. Bigger ears, obviously. He was a compact man with dark eyes, close-cropped hair, and a military bearing. Ramrod straight, even while sitting.

He regarded the boys as a zookeeper regarded the animals in his care. Impatient with the ones that didn’t budge when prodded, wary around those that slung feces.

Christian never understood why such people became correctional officers. At least zookeepers enjoyed knowing their captives never went free. On the other hand, now that he thought about it, juvenile detention wardens could dangle freedom before the boys, could taunt them with it.

“One of these days you’ll be leaving us,” Ramirez said. “I asked you here so we might talk about when that day should come.”

Don’t worry, Christian thought, there are more boys where I came from. Why breed monkeys in captivity when they’re so easy to capture in the wild?

“My sentence is finite,” he said. “I leave in six months. The judge said so.”

“You leave when we say you leave. Your release is pending a psychological evaluation. If we decide it’s in your best interest to stay, or in society’s best interest, you’ll stay. The judge will rubber-stamp it, trust me.”

“Mr. Ramirez, your psych exams only show that I don’t like it here. Which doesn’t set me apart, because no one likes it here, not even you. Keeping me here longer will only cause me to perform yet more poorly on psych exams, which in turn will keep me here even longer. Tell me, are your interests in me perverse?”

Christian finally looked up and made eye contact. The superintendent held his gaze for a few seconds, then turned away.

“You think I’m disturbed,” Christian said.

Ramirez rose, went to the window, and stood with his back to Christian. “No, I just think you’re an asshole.”

Christian wondered what the man thought as he scanned the barracks outside. In 1942, before the present structures were built, the camp consisted of barbed wire, wide open space, and Japanese Americans huddled in makeshift tents. What did Mickey see? A rehabilitation facility? A former internment camp? A zoo?

A file was open on Ramirez’s desk. Christian could read the entries upside down.

Age: 15...

Medium build, blue eyes, sandy hair...

Family: None known...

Hobbies: None exhibited...

Diagnosis: Classic conduct disorder, bordering on antisocial personality disorder...

Counselor’s notes: Christian Zorn is a tormented young man. In the continued absence of a passion for anything, peace of mind will elude him...

“Why do you steal?” Ramirez asked.

“Why not?”

“Well, doing so landed you here, for one thing. And you’re right, the examinations show you don’t like it here.”

The paperweight caught Christian’s eye again. It was the pointless and absurd kind, a plastic Alpine village with “snow.” Christian guessed one of his children had given it to him.

“You steal, Mr. Ramirez. You steal all the time.”

“Do I?”

“When you eat honey,” Christian said, “you steal from bees.”

Ramirez returned to his desk and sat down. “So you only steal for sustenance?”

“Your subtlety dazzles me. Haven’t I gone over this enough times with my counselor?”

“I’m just curious. Indulge me, please. Let’s say hungry people steal food. Shoeless people steal shoes, or so I would imagine. You rob jewelry stores. I suppose liquidated jewelry can buy a lot of honey and fix you up with some fancy footwear. Nevertheless, I wonder what the real reason is you do it.”

The real reason? It gave him cause to climb out of bed in the morning. But of course he wasn’t going to tell Ramirez. He wasn’t going to share anything insightful with the man. He’d spent six months at The Corners and had six months left on his sentence. He would have been sentenced to more time had he been sixteen, or had he carried a weapon during his last job. Or had they known just how many jobs he’d done.

It was the last one that landed him here. The police were doing routine drive-by checks of the neighborhood jewelry stores when Christian and two partners happened to be racing out of one of them, following a smash-and-grab. The partners got away. Christian, hauling bags of loot he was unwilling to shed,

first ran one direction, then foolishly changed his mind and headed in the other, right into the snare of the cops.

Which was poetic in its own way, because Christian had always run from challenges, yet had never managed to escape them. He'd been told all his life he was bad. What else did bad guys do? They ran. They did bad things, and they ran.

The first few weeks at The Corners had been unbearable. Ramirez was right: he'd rather have spent the time anywhere else. Anywhere at all. The guards kept the bigger boys in line, and the bigger boys took care of the others. It was a study in efficiency. For the last six months Christian had been bullied by deviant and psychotic subhumans who had serious climbing to do to reach the bottom rung of the social ladder.

The one claim in his file that was incorrect was that he didn't have a hobby. He did: planning prison breaks.

Peace of mind will elude him...

"I steal because I'm a juvenile offender, Mr. Ramirez. I'm a juvenile offender because I steal. It's a vicious cycle."

"According to this," Ramirez tapped the file, "you have no goals, no ambitions, nothing. You're a cynical young man without passion or purpose. Life is an arbitrary sequence of events, you once told your counselor. 'Shit happens. Or not. Whoop-dee-fucking-doo.' That's a quote."

"I'm surprised you think otherwise. Do you still believe, at your age, that you're in control of anything? The only meaningful purpose in life is to suffer events as comfortably as possible."

Ramirez leaned over his desk and paused. "Okay, wouldn't you be more comfortable on the outside?"

"No, Mr. Ramirez, I'd like to stay at The Corners for the rest of my life. I've acquired a taste for buggery."

“Because,” Ramirez continued, “if you happened to be interested in completing your sentence on the outside, working a job, an opportunity has come up.”

As soon as Christian caught his breath and froze in his chair, he knew he’d revealed his interest. He relaxed, crossed his legs, and shrugged. But it was too late; Ramirez was studying him closely.

The superintendent’s demeanor bore the quiet resignation of a man who had launched his career energetically but now was merely going through the motions. Like all of them, he had originally wanted to make a difference, and like all of them, he suspected he hadn’t even made a dent.

“All right,” Christian said, “I’m interested.”

“It’s on the honor system. If you flee, or commit another crime, you’ll never get another such opportunity.”

“What’s the job?”

Ramirez swiveled in his chair and opened a cabinet drawer. As his back was turned, Christian swiped the paperweight and slid it into his pocket.

“A vineyard in Napa Valley,” Ramirez said, his back still turned to Christian. The name of the town is Delheim. It’s full of Germans.”

“Germans? Actual Germans?”

Ramirez turned back around and dropped a file on his desk. “Well, descendants of German immigrants. The owner, Immanuel Dessoir, needs help with labor. He has three daughters. His wife is dead. And when I say labor, I mean labor. It won’t be a picnic. The harvest has already begun, and they need someone right away.”

“Why don’t they just hire someone? Why take a chance on a juvie?”

“They have a tradition of offering opportunities to, shall we say, wayward souls.”

“How much of the wine am I allowed to drink?”

“Christian, if you fuck this up, you’ll come straight back to The Corners. And I’ll make sure buggery will be the least of your discomforts. This, young man, is a shot at redemption.”

Christian smiled. He’d been bugged, he’d been beaten, he’d been abandoned. The orphanage that raised him had employed a grizzled old bird named Henry. A handyman, janitor, and creep. Henry had been fond of little boys. The staff and administration knew about him, yet did nothing. They also knew that Ethan, who was one year younger than Christian, didn’t own a toothbrush. Nearly half the boys wet their beds. The rest were too scared to.

“Why me?”

Ramirez consulted Christian’s file. “In a word, intelligence. Your aptitude scores are the highest I’ve ever seen. The help you gave Feldman last month in the boiler room? He thinks you’re a genius.”

Feldman hadn’t been able to figure out what was causing a loss of pressure in one of the boilers. Christian had conjectured a cause and subsequently found the leak.

“Do you think I’m a genius?”

“I already told you what I think—you’re an asshole. However, I agree with your counselor that if you find something you care about you might straighten out your life. You have the brains. You just need direction.”

“And you think helping an old man squeeze juice out of grapes is the direction I should be going.”

Ramirez leaned back in his chair. “It’s that or back to the boiler room. Or permanent latrine duty, if you prefer.”

Christian was silent. He had experience breaking and entering, but precious little toiling in the fields. Still, the thought of freeing himself from The Corners was so appealing, he kept his sarcastic mouth shut.

There was no privacy at The Corners. The barracks each housed forty boys, all in one large room. The toilets lined up in a row, with no partitions separating them, no stalls. Every boy got to see every other boy wipe himself.

"In six months you'll turn sixteen, Christian. Commit a crime after that, and it's not to The Corners you'll go. It might even be San Quentin, where you'll spend your days ironing shirts."

"Let me guess. That's no picnic either, right?"

Ramirez flipped Christian's file shut. "No, it isn't."

"I'll be sure to keep it in mind on my birthday. Are you going to probe my memories of Mommy and Daddy now?"

"Haven't you had your fill?"

"You have no idea. I've lost count of how many times I've been told to forgive them."

"Christian, to forgive others you must first learn to forgive yourself."

"How profound. Can I go now?"

"Yes." Ramirez rose from his chair. "As soon as I get my paperweight back."

Chapter Two

The village of Delheim had its charms. It would need them, Christian decided, to make up for a lack of any practical reason to be there.

The Corners minivan wound down a road not quite wide enough for two vehicles. Christian wondered what the driver, a Corners administrator, would do if he met an oncoming bus. A low stone wall bordered one side of the road. It served to prevent a steep hillside vineyard from spilling over. On the other side, grapevines stretched to the horizon, row after row of gnarled trunks and probing canes grasping leaves in regimented obstinacy. Grapes dangled low in pregnant clusters.

The road snaked down to the Rotenbach, a tributary of the Napa. All great vineyards were near water. That much Christian knew about winemaking. A vineyard's artery was its river; the grape's lifeblood was the water filling its channels.

The vineyards faced south, to take advantage of the northern hemisphere sun. And the river helped by reflecting sunrays during late afternoon. The river was also the source of moisture, of spectral fog that crept up the slate-carpeted embankments, and thus of the magical Noble Rot, the *Botrytis cinerea* fungus that made Riesling the king of white grapes. That much Christian knew. All residents of wine country knew.

“Best to keep your mouth shut around these people,” the driver said. “For the first few weeks, anyway. Give them time to know you before they judge you.”

“Do you know these people?” Christian asked.

The driver slowed as they reached the bottom of the hill and approached a wooden bridge.

“Nobody knows them.”

Ramirez had prepared Christian as well. “They’re more part of the earth than the space above it. More a subspecies than fully human. You’ll look into their weathered faces and crinkled eyes and see all the way back to the birth of viniculture.”

Germans were among the earliest winemakers in Napa country, he explained. In the 1850s the Dessoir family immigrated from Delheim, Germany in the Nahe Valley, founded a hamlet on a small tributary of the Napa River, and named it after their former home.

First they planted the Mission grape, like most other wineries in the county. Later, in part to battle the Phylloxera infestation, they imported native Riesling stock. Neighbors planted Silvaner, Gewürztraminer, and a host of French varieties. The single-family homestead of Delheim grew into a village, and wine production soared. It survived prohibition by selling grape must to home winemakers.

The van crossed the bridge, timbers rattling in protest, and emerged onto a narrow floodplain between the river and the town. Mountains rose timidly in the distance, dense with oaks and firs, their colors losing saturation as they receded. A low fog cloaked the tranquil waters of the Rotenbach and crept tentatively up the steep northern bank.

Christian could see the entire built-up environment at a glance: houses aspiring to be German, specifically Bavarian, with

orange tile roofs and brick walls, criss-crossed with exposed wooden beams. Trellises and window boxes gushed with geraniums and petunias. And a medieval-style stone wall, mostly crumbled, garnished with moss, postured itself more in surrender than defense.

The tallest structure in the village was the church. Its attempt to imitate a cathedral was indulged by diminutive neighboring buildings, whose unassuming postures allowed it to succeed.

The van rumbled down cobblestone streets, passing through the shadows of pines older than any resident. The pines towered high enough that houses were a nuisance to them, like a child's toys strewn underfoot.

"How many people live here?" Christian asked the driver.

"Two hundred seven, last count. It gets as high as two hundred eight when the doctor's in town. He stays with August's family. You're going to Immanuel's place. They don't get along."

"Why not?"

"You'll learn in good time. Just work hard and keep your mouth shut. You don't want to return to The Corners, believe me. The older boys will treat you like a pin cushion if you come crawling back. And Ramirez won't lift a finger to protect you, if you let him down. Now is not the time to fail."

They slowed before a French eclectic mansion with tall chimneys, shuttered windows, and balustraded balconies. The steep hipped roof, surfaced with slabs of gray slate, resembled bare patches of vineyard Christian could just make out across the river.

Despite the opulence, the house had a quiet restfulness about it, an unpretentious air, as though its residents had more humble roots. There was a shabby, unkempt quality about the brick walls, a sense of exhaustion, a loss of ambition to live up to its

architectural aspirations. The residents were not only modest, they were poor.

“Your new home,” the driver said.

They waited on the sidewalk after ringing the bell. Birds made the only sounds, and even they seemed to share in the bucolic mood.

Christian noticed grapevines growing in the yard. Each vine had its own personality, the gnarled branches expressing individual character, spreading wide as well as high, to the deliberate beat of their unique and visionary drums.

A breeze rolled in from downstream. Christian’s eyes followed the river to the horizon. On the near side was a narrow fertile floodplain, a strip of low-growth wildness separating vine-encroached homes from the danger of flood waters. On the far side was the steep south-facing bank of the Rotenbach, camouflaged by densely planted vines reveling in an over-abundance of chlorophyll. He saw teams of people, in threes, fives, twenties, marching up the slopes, hauling buckets.

The breeze gained strength. The vines in the yard swayed, and Christian couldn’t tell which of them pushed the other. Then a different sound. An echo, a voice. Someone was singing. And it sounded both far away and inside his own head.

He looked up. No one was in sight other than the Corners driver.

“Did you hear that?” he asked.

“Hear what?”

The door to the house opened. The man in the doorframe was fiftyish, stout, with dark brown eyes and short chestnut hair flecked with gray. His face was weathered and tired, yet proud. He viewed Christian and the driver with fleeting curiosity, then

unceremoniously picked up Christian's small duffel bag and threw it over his shoulder.

Christian would have guessed he was a butler if he hadn't been wearing workman's clothes and mismatched suspenders. Probably a field hand.

The man shook the driver's hand. "Thank you, Carl," he said.

"And you, Immanuel."

"Immanuel?" Christian asked. "You're Immanuel Dessoir?"

The man's eyes took Christian in, stripped him of every veneer, of every corporeal nook in which to hide. He extended a calloused hand.

"Yes," he said. "And most of the time, I'm content with it."

Chapter Three

Immanuel showed Christian to his room, which was next door to the fermenting vats and reeked of yeast and CO₂ gas. The room housed a low, wooden frame bed and a student-grade desk and chair. A Schrank covered one wall.

“You’ll put your belongings in there,” Immanuel said, pointing at the closet. “It’s the only storage place you have. The room is warm on cold nights. On warm nights you won’t concern yourself with temperature because you’ll be busy working. The food here is plentiful; you won’t go hungry. Any questions?”

Christian approached the single window. He had a view to the south-facing slopes across the river. Although it was difficult to distinguish individual vines, they nevertheless made an undulating pattern, like comrades locked arm in arm.

“No,” he said.

“Ever picked before?”

“Excuse me?”

“Grapes. Have you ever taken part in a harvest?”

“Only one berry at a time, in front of the TV.”

“Welcome to the hardest day of your life.”

The people Christian had seen climbing the vineyards were the early birds. The main body of labor now gathered in pockets at the bottom of the hill. Some were already swigging from wine

bottles, “fortifying” themselves for the work ahead. An unofficial uniform consisted of baseball cap, work gloves, and a small, straight-sided wine glass holstered in leather. The latter hung about the neck on a thin cord.

Tractors pulled carts furnished with benches, decorated with vines and flowers, overcrowded with drinking revelers. Christian wondered how any picking was going to take place. He followed Immanuel into a cart and sat on the bench next to him. The tractor pulling the cart chug-chugged up the long hill.

Some of the low-hanging grape bunches were already turning brown. By contrast the leaves were still vibrant. Fall had arrived; the coolness was a relief, and the air felt moist. Christian spotted a pair of deer napping between two rows.

The dull green hills seemed restless. If only they knew their produce would live for years, maybe decades, would outlive the people picking them. That they’d be replanted with young vines when the old ones died.

One cart carried musicians. A song struck up in German. The singing spread down the train of carts.

*Wie bin ich, ach, so tief gesunken
In allen Schenken kehr’ ich ein*

They passed Pinot Noir grapes, purple jewels amid apple green leaves; the plump fruit of Müller-Thurgau; and the spherical berries that characterized Riesling.

Older vines expended all the energy they had to produce grapes, reminding Christian of bent and withered laborers. They lived a precarious existence, their branches no stronger than twigs, their grapes shamefully more visible in the relative absence of leaves.

As the cart climbed higher, Christian looked down at the Rotenbach, at its water sparkling in the sun.

*Was braucht man mehr, um froh zu sein
Als Jugend, Liebe, Lied, und Wein*

Up the steep banks went sixteen carts, ringing with song and laughter. Jugs made the rounds, glasses were filled and emptied. To Christian, the dry Riesling tasted like kerosene. He could see the flash of green glass in other carts as bottles passed from hand to hand, glints of merriment all down the line.

They stopped. Immanuel handed Christian a pair of gloves.

“I won’t need those,” Christian said.

“Come see me when you change your mind.”

Christian followed the cue of the others and picked up a bucket. He headed down one of the rows. The ground was littered with weathered rocks, slate and its metamorphic brethren.

The vines were leafy, trellised on taut wires, and well trained. Their leaves were broad and just beginning to turn yellow, some to rust. Their trunks and branches were painfully gnarled. And they were sagging with fruit. Small green berries.

Christian put one in his mouth. Still a little sour. Inside were crunchy seeds.

Some grapes already rotted on their vines. Such vines were ashen gray, had thicker trunks, peeling bark. A few had died. These were scraggly, pathetic placeholders in their rows, most of their branches long truncated from previous pruning, and were now useless stumps.

Above Christian was a great expanse of blue sky. The vines waited patiently, rows stretching up the hill, with military disci-

pline, then disappearing over the top. Tractors on hilltops were the size of toys.

He surveyed his fellow pickers. Children and old people were in the crowd fanning out with him. If they can do it, he thought, surely I can too. And without any damn mittens. He dropped his bucket at the end of the row, squatted low to the ground, and reached into a vine.

The first problem revealed itself immediately: finding the grapes. Granted, they were in bunches, but the bunches hid themselves in clusters of leaves. Picking them required wrestling with the vine. And then, as if to laugh at Christian when he finally did reach them, they fell to the ground of their own accord.

Do I put those in my bucket too? he asked himself. The grapes were now dirty.

His silent question was answered when someone in the next row deftly snatched the fallen grapes from Christian's row and put them in his own bucket.

He looked down the long line of vines. Pickers in adjacent rows were harvesting fallen bunches in his row. His grapes. From his row.

Presently someone yelled "Eimer!" and Immanuel trudged over to the picker, a large cone-shaped hod strapped to his back. The picker emptied his bucket into the vessel. Immanuel turned and headed toward Christian.

He looked down into his bucket. It contained a single bunch of grapes. The other pickers had been filling their buckets with his grapes. Immanuel would think him lazy.

He dove into the next vine and fumbled around for fruit. Two bunches fell to the ground and rolled downhill. Downhill—to end up in someone else's bucket.

Immanuel approached. Christian lifted his bucket to empty it into the hod, but Immanuel grabbed his arm first and looked inside.

“Impressive,” he said. “And without gloves!”

“I must have been issued a deeper bucket.”

“Of course. The next excuse you’ll come up with is that others are filling their buckets with rocks and topping off with grapes.”

“There’s an idea.”

“Finally you’ll complain that children and old people are stealing your grapes.”

“They are!”

“Next time I come around, show me a full bucket.”

A hoarse voice from down the line called “Eimer!” and Immanuel turned away.

Christian had always figured grape picking, like any field work, would be hard. But no one had ever told him why. He’d assumed it was hard because you had to bend over and lift things, maybe carry stuff around. However, he wasn’t carrying anything; that leisurely task was reserved for Immanuel. And picking grapes wasn’t the hard part. Finding the damn things was.

He stood, he sat, he squatted. He bent this way, crawled that way. He dropped his grapes. They rolled downhill.

Soon he learned to pick up the fallen fruit first as he worked his way down the line—before someone else got to it. He snatched them from the nettles flourishing among the shards of slate. It wasn’t long before his hands turned red and itchy.

He moved his bucket strategically to catch the grape bunches as they fell. But still the joke was on him. Moving the bucket each time he attacked the jungle of leaves turned out to be even more awkward than fishing for grapes in a sea of nettles. It was possible

to go half a minute without hooking a single berry. And all the while he observed the success others were enjoying, an observation that itself consumed valuable time in the unofficial competition.

The vine nearest him rustled, even though he wasn't even touching it. Someone from the other side was harvesting it. Someone was grabbing his accessible grapes—the easy grapes!

He glanced around the shrubbery and made eye contact with a frail man who presented a deeply lined face and moist, sorrowful eyes.

The man raised his bucket, which was overflowing. "I guess now you'll accuse me of filling the bottom with rocks."

That did it. Christian hobbled farther up the row. He gathered bunches of grapes that had fallen to the ground. He pulled the quick pickings off the vines, the bunches that were exposed and easy to reach. His bucket now half full, he waged war on the leaves, groping for the stubborn grapes clinging to the vine.

They evaded his grasp. They squirmed to avoid his hungry fists. Grapes—with survival instincts! The ones he got his hands around resisted his pull, clinging to the branches like children to their mothers' skirts.

Immanuel was approaching again. Christian would have a full bucket this time. He dropped another bunch into it—and accidentally tipped it over on the steep incline. He watched, expressionless, as the bucket, its contents, and fifteen minutes of exasperating effort rolled down the hill.

As he retrieved the empty bucket, Immanuel appeared and looked inside. "Armless men can do better," he said.

"Thank you for coming by so often," Christian said. "My ego appreciates your thoughtful consideration."

Immanuel pulled a bottle of Schnapps out of a satchel and filled a tall shot glass. “Here, fortify yourself.”

Christian downed the Schnapps.

“Feel better?” Immanuel asked.

“Rapturous.”

“Good. Next time I come around, show me a full bucket.” He looked pointedly into Christian’s empty bucket. “Or anything.”

As Christian worked his way up the slope it got steeper, and his problems reduced to one: keeping his balance. The choice between bending and squatting had been difficult enough; his solution was to alternate between the two, to distribute the pain. Picking on a steep slope engaged muscles he hadn’t used since grade school gymnastics class. Now he gave up, sat on the ground, and pushed himself upslope backwards like a legless man. He knew his backside would be muddy, and people would see it, but he was past caring what anyone thought of his appearance. Only the damn bucket mattered.

His reputation must already have passed down the rows from picker to picker: the young man whose production rate was zero. The boy who went bowling with grapes. The kid who scolded nettles. But you gotta give him credit for discovering it was easier to fill a bucket with air than with fruit!

The bucket tipped again. This time he dove after the grapes and was able to prevent half of them from rolling downhill. He laughed at it all: if you think they’re hard to pick while secured to a woody plant, try harvesting them as they flee.

He placed a handful of berries in his mouth and chewed. They were tart but delicious.

The rheumatic old man from the next row stuck his head between the vines and said, “Don’t drink up the harvest before it

goes to press.” He reached around, snatched a free-hanging bunch of grapes from Christian’s vine, and was gone.

Immanuel increased the frequency of his rounds, and Christian soon understood why. Knowing all the pickers were competing to fill their buckets faster, emptying those buckets more often into his hod accelerated production. When the girl in the next row, on the opposite side of the old man, a girl with arms like drinking straws, presented Immanuel with an overflowing bucket, and his was still empty, he worked all the harder to have a full bucket next time. *Or at least a grape or two.*

But next time Immanuel cut his round even shorter. And although Christian had worked frantically to fill his bucket, it was still half empty, and the girl’s in the next row was somehow full again.

Which wasn’t the end of the world. Until she glanced at him scornfully, even casting her all-seeing eyes up and down his figure, as though assessing the extent of human flesh wasted on his frame. And then she stuck out her tongue. *That* was the end of the world.

“Check his bucket for rocks!” someone yelled down the way, and there was scattered laughter.

“Don’t drink the harvest before it goes to press!”

“Eimer!”

Christian sat in the slate and stretched his aching limbs. His hands were red and swollen from the nettles. He was covered in sweat, and felt filthier than ever before in his life. He missed The Corners. Let them bugger me, he thought. Let them turn me into a pin cushion. How the hell did I get talked into this?

Immanuel came by again, and this time Christian just shook his head. “I don’t think I can do this anymore.”

“We’re not even half finished.”

“I’m completely finished.”

“Looks to me you haven’t even started. Looks to me, that’s been the problem your whole life.” He turned to leave.

“Leave the bottle,” Christian said.

Immanuel reached into his satchel, removed the Schnapps bottle, which was three-fourths empty, and tossed it to him.

Christian pulled the cork with his teeth and gulped the fiery liquid. It burned all the way down to his toes. He sat up, grabbed his bucket, and crawled on his knees to the next vine.

A bunch of grapes sat on the ground in the old man’s row, overlooked or spilled or forgotten. He snatched it up and threw it disgustedly into his bucket.

He crawled down the row until he was ahead of both the old man and the stick-figure girl, and picked the low-hanging fruit on their sides, beckoning to be stolen.

“How’s this for a start, Mr. Dessoir?” he called out. “Haven’t you heard? Peace of mind eludes me!”

Chapter Four

Christian didn't remember the trip back down the hill at day's end. He must have dozed. Immanuel nudged him once, to offer him a glass of "fortification." When they arrived at the winery Christian spilled from the truck and said, "I'm going to lay down for a while. Wake me at dinnertime. Preferably dinnertime tomorrow."

"I'm afraid the work's not yet finished," Immanuel said. "The grapes must now be crushed."

Christian followed Immanuel listlessly into the winery. Carts of grapes, hauled by tractors, lined up before the barn-like door. One by one they chugged into the spacious room and positioned themselves before the crushers.

Immanuel placed a trough between a cart and a crusher, and handed Christian a shovel.

"Jump in," he said, "and have at it."

"It's full of grapes."

"I can see that. Jump in."

Christian did, inadvertently squishing grapes beneath his boots. Other workers were already "having at it" in neighboring carts. The trough connected to Christian's cart extended downwards at a gentle angle to a mechanical grinding machine that pumped the crushed skins and juice into a press.

Christian scooped up grapes with his shovel and tossed them onto the trough. They slid down the aluminum surface into the jaws of the crusher. He reloaded his shovel.

“The grapes must be crushed before they can be pressed,” Immanuel explained. “A grape all by itself may seem weak, but put thousands of them together, and their combined integrity makes it impossible to break the skins.”

Thanks for the science lesson, Christian thought. He loaded his shovel again, and noticed that other workers were shoveling faster, making him look slow—again. All winemaking was apparently a petty competition. He wanted to ask whether contests were held after wine fests to see who could pee the farthest. He picked up speed.

Everything ended up in the press: juice, skins, seeds, twigs, leaves, mold, dirt, even bugs. Some of the most repugnant citizens of the insect kingdom had a hankering for grapes. They too would become part of the wine.

Christian’s muscles protested with aches. They were already stiff from a long day of cliffside contortions. Now they were asked to do the work of a strong and rested man. One who gave a damn about what he was doing.

Immanuel was watching, and Christian didn’t want another “Next time, show me a full bucket” rebuke. So he bent to the task.

The must flowed into a cylindrical hydraulic press. Once the press was full, Immanuel turned it on, and grape juice, cloudy and green, flowed from an outlet in the bottom through a hose that disappeared into the wall and snaked its way to casks next door.

With each toss of the shovel, Christian was sure it would be his last. Just one more, and he would topple over with exhaustion. Just one more, and he could go back to The Corners, where

life was uncomplicated and buggery wasn't so distasteful after all. Just one more, just one more.

Can't do it, must do it, can't do it, must do it. The other workers didn't appear to feel any pain at all. Some were smiling! Maybe they were just good at concealing agony. Immanuel was still watching. Don't let him see it. Don't let on you're about to die. Don't give the bastard the satisfaction.

The last cart was empty, the last press was full and pressing, and thousands of liters of juice were filling the fiberglass containers.

Immanuel took the shovel from Christian's hand. "The work is done," he said.

"I can go to bed?"

"Time to eat."

✱

Picnic tables were arrayed in the lawn behind the winery. A temporary shelter had been erected, in case of rain, but the skies were clear. A pair of swinging grills, suspended from tripods, smoked enthusiastically under the stewardship of sweating field hands who fueled the fires from heaping stacks of canes and dead vines.

As evening settled, a low mist crept up the river, a whispery fog bearing the Noble Rot. It had waited all day for the work to get done. Now it brushed the steep slopes with a soft white glow and brought a soothing calm to the hillsides.

Immanuel sat next to Christian and pointed at the mist. "That's how the real winemaking takes place," he said.

"It looks alive."

Immanuel glanced at him curiously, then reached for a slice of bread.

“Dear Lord,” he said, and all present bowed their heads in silence. “Thank you for this bounty, for the accommodating weather, and for not interfering when all is well. Amen!”

“Amen!” the others repeated.

He turned to Christian. “Eat.”

They feasted on Schaukelbraten and Bratwurst, potato dumplings, cabbage salad, dinner rolls, Black Forest Cake, and of course wine. The main purpose of the food was to absorb the wine. The picnic tables soon became noisy with gossip, laughter, and fists banging on wood. It got so noisy, Christian had to wait for breaks to make himself heard by his neighbors.

He smiled at the banter about ailments, each worker claiming to have one worse than anyone else’s. Afflictions of the skin, the respiratory system, the eyes and ears. Undiagnosed blood diseases that accounted for all manner of symptoms. Deadly warts. One man declared, “I have a disease that hasn’t even been invented yet.”

Immanuel waved down three young women serving food, and beckoned them toward him.

“My daughters,” he announced to Christian. It seemed to Christian the pride in Immanuel’s voice was laced with a hint of warning.

Claire Dessoir was tall, with dark brown eyes and hair—both like her father. Her hair was tied in a bun, which Christian found both anachronistic and amusing. Her features were attractively sturdy, reminding Christian of photographs he’d seen of pioneer women. She dressed the part as well, in an ankle-length dress with closed collar and sleeves that stopped halfway between the elbow and the wrist.

“Claire is eighteen,” Immanuel said. “She knows everything.”

“She,” Claire shot back, “doesn’t need her father telling

people how old she is.”

“She intends to marry great wealth,” Immanuel continued.

“There are other qualities I admire in a man,” she said.

“Not to exclude great wealth.”

“No, not to exclude that.”

Gabriella Dessoir was of medium height, with green eyes and streaked blonde hair. She was clearly more rebellious than Claire. Her shorts were a little too short and her midriff was bare. To Christian she seemed comfortable in her own skin and in fact wasn’t trying to provoke with her provocative clothing. Her father had a different take on the matter.

“My middle daughter,” Immanuel said. “The fifteen-year-old exhibitionist.”

“With a pagan tattoo,” Gabriella said. “On my butt.”

“You’ll have other marks on your butt if you don’t behave yourself.”

“Sticks and stones.”

Violet Dessoir was petite with soft brown eyes and auburn hair. She peeked at Christian from behind her two sisters, her head tilted slightly, her eyes wide, her hair tousled and disorderly. She smiled a crooked, closed-mouth smile, no doubt to hide the gap in her front teeth.

“My youngest daughter,” Immanuel said. “My nine-year-old. Innocent as a falling leaf. And exasperatingly optimistic. Watch.” He turned to Violet and asked, “What day is it today?”

“Saturday,” Violet said. “My favorite.”

“You see?” Immanuel said. “She says that about every day.”

“Are you really a criminal?” Violet asked Christian.

“Schatz...”

“No, it’s okay,” Christian said. “Yes, I was a criminal.”

“A dangerous criminal?”

“It’s best not to get too close.”

“Indeed,” Immanuel said, rising. The introductions were over. He faced Christian and spoke in a low voice. “You’re in a foster home now. A temporary arrangement. Don’t forget either.” He walked off toward the river.

“Where’s he going?” Christian asked.

“To visit Mother,” Claire answered.

“Out there?”

Claire took Violet’s hand to lead her away. “You’ll learn about it as you go along.”

Chapter Five

Harvesting the grapes took three more days. When the work was finally done, Christian climbed out of bed early and went outside to stretch in the front yard. It felt strange being able to do so, to just step out the front door of a building into the open sunshine, and if he wished, to choose an arbitrary direction and start walking.

The air was fresh and he was sure he could smell the river, musty and organic. Brownish green mountains commanded the near horizon. Volcanic deposits resting on sandstone. Haphazardly laid foundations bearing grapevines in orderly rows.

Fog blanketed the river like a ground-level cloud. It crept tentatively along the river until the rising sun gradually burned it off. The fog may have owned the night, but the sun owned the day.

When Christian reentered the house he ran into Immanuel, who put him to work cleaning equipment. The crushers and presses had to be rinsed out and the floors hosed down, the water streaming into grated drains. The migrant workers were gone; they'd been employed only to pick.

"It's just you and me now," Immanuel said.

Already the airlocks on the fermentation casks gurgled softly and sporadically. Immanuel told Christian to press his hand against the fiberglass side of a cask. It was warm.

“The noise will get louder,” Immanuel said. “The fermentation has just begun. This room will sound like a waterfall before long.”

Christian peered through the translucent wall of the cask he had just touched. The juice was yellowish green and cloudy, and already sediment collected at the bottom. Almost imperceptibly slow currents churned in the cask, microscopic yeast cells feasting on sugar, multiplying by the millions.

“The waste product of yeast is ethanol,” Immanuel explained. “Drinking alcohol. When the sugar is gone, the yeast will die off and settle to the bottom. All that’s left to do is rack and clarify the wine.”

He climbed a ladder to the top of the cask, removed its airlock, and inserted a small syphon into the must. After filling a shot glass he handed it to Christian.

“It’s sweet,” Christian said.

“Won’t be for long.” Immanuel climbed back down the ladder. “Other wineries use stainless steel tanks. We do it the German way. Let the wine ferment. Don’t interfere. Add nothing pretentious, not even decorative caps on the bottles.”

The room was filling with an invisible cloud of CO₂ gas. It was heavy, sweetish, and slightly suffocating. Christian figured he’d get used to it.

Immanuel pointed down the line of casks, just beginning to gurgle and sputter. “This will support us for another year,” he said.

“So now we just stand and watch?”

Immanuel went into the corner and retrieved a mop and bucket. He handed them to Christian.

“Now we mop the floor.”

“We meaning me.”

“You catch on fast.”

“When do I learn all the tricks of the trade?”

“When you’re ready.”

The fermentation room was dauntingly long. Immanuel insisted its floor be spotless. Before he left he inspected the space closely, sniffing around for dust and dirt.

“In the most micro of environments,” he said on his way out, “there are three enemies of wine. The first is oxygen; exposure ages the wine. The second is bacteria; keep all tools and surfaces clean.”

“And the third?” Christian asked.

“I’ll let you figure that one out yourself.”

Deep into the job Christian’s arms ached yet again. The pleasure of wine, it seemed, was the sole province of the wine drinker.

At mid-morning Claire passed through as if to inspect the new boy’s work. Dressed like a schoolmarm, she stepped disrespectfully onto a patch of wet floor and cleared her throat.

“Lunch is at noon. Father says you’ll be eating at table with us.”

“Thank you.”

“You may wish to wash up first. Whether or not you’re in the habit.”

She turned stiffly and left. Christian continued mopping.

A few minutes later Gabi entered the room, taking care not to step anywhere Christian had mopped. She wore a short skirt and a low-cut blouse.

"Guess what?" she said. "You get to eat at the family table with the nobility. Father must like you. He normally makes the hired hands eat in the barn."

"You have a barn?"

"I was speaking metaphorically. Better wash up now."

"What if it's not my habit?"

"Excuse me?"

"Forget it. Stupid joke."

"Dinner will be ready in a few minutes."

"Did you cook it?"

She tilted her head. "What if I did?"

"Then I'd certainly want to eat it."

She smiled. "Actually, Claire cooked it. She prepares all the meals. She took over for Mother after her death eight years ago."

Christian did some quick arithmetic. "She began cooking for the family at the age of ten?"

"Yes," Gabi said softly, "she did."

*

To say more was piled onto Christian's plate than he could eat was an understatement. More was piled on than he could lift.

Okay, he thought, that's an exaggeration. He had grown used to meager portions at The Corners, to being hungry all the time.

Sauerbraten. Red cabbage, potato dumplings. The vinegar sauce was tangy and left a long, pleasant aftertaste, nothing like the "gravy" served at The Corners. The beef was so tender, Christian imagined cows bathing in the marinade. A Pinot from the valley. For dessert, cheesecake with strawberries.

The family priest attended the meal. He did most of the talking. His words blended into a dull hum that buzzed past Christian's ears.

Violet sat across from Christian and watched him eat. She appeared amused by his slow deliberation, by his cherishing each bite before taking another, his eyes closed, his head tilted back. She imitated him, closing her eyes, staring at the ceiling, chewing slowly, frequently glancing at him for further guidance.

In the adjoining living room was an upright piano, pushed up against the wall. It looked beaten, like it had served a previous generation. Maybe two. And it gave Christian a start; he had learned on a similar instrument. It was the only instance in which his mother had done him right. "Wash behind your ears," she had insisted. "And practice your scales."

The Pinot tasted good. Christian had never had one before. He'd snuck sips of his father's jug wine, when it was available, when his father was occupied beating his mother. Which wasn't often enough for Christian to develop a taste for wine, because his mother only sometimes got caught sleeping with other men.

The family priest jabbered. "Mrs. Becker's tomatoes are afflicted with aphids. She's trying to lure ladybugs to eat the aphids, but judging by the condition of the leaves, it's too late. The Waldorf girl has been especially friendly with certain boys, and soon there will be an addition to the family. Mr. Edelmann's wine is already turning brown in the vat, same as last year. Oxidation, same as last year. Mr. Eckes recently visited a urologist in the city. It's anyone's guess as to why. Perhaps he'll reveal the reason during confession. But of course if he does, I won't be able to repeat it, at least not using his real name. Mrs. Grunewald has a new weathervane..."

Claire leaned over to Christian and whispered, "You notice no one's saying anything."

"For lack of opportunity, no doubt."

“Actually because anything said outside the confessional is fair game in this community.”

“I don’t go to Confession.”

She looked at him reproachfully. “You should.”

The priest was still running off at the mouth. “August expects another record harvest.”

“And thus poorer quality wine than ever before,” Immanuel said.

“You still insist on lowering yields.”

“If I could lower yields to zero and still make wine, I would.”

The priest sipped his coffee. “There is talk about your precarious finances.”

“There always has been.”

“Talk, or precarious finances?”

“Both.”

“You’d make more money if you made more wine.”

“You’d save more souls if you minded the pulpit.”

“Father!” Claire said.

The priest threw his hands in the air. “Very well. It has been a delightful lunch. Thank you, ladies.” He nodded to the three girls.

After he left, Immanuel turned to Claire. “Why do we keep inviting him?”

“Consider the alternative. Besides, how else would we hear about Mrs. Grunewald’s new weathervane?”

Christian noticed Violet was still watching him. When he met her gaze she turned away blushing. Gabi, on the other hand, made a show of ignoring him. Excusing himself, he left the table and went for a walk in the village. He hoped Gabi would sneak out and join him. But he waited a few minutes in front of the house, and no one came.

He couldn't feel any movement in the air. Yet the trees could. Their leaves fluttered and quaked to an inconspicuous or imaginary stirring of wind. The birds were noisy, and Christian wondered whether they were talking among themselves, whether they were happy.

Tree crowns rustled aloft. Above the rooftops the wind made no effort to disguise itself. Sunlight emerged from behind clouds drifting overhead like hot air balloons. The sun warmed the streets and sidewalks.

Distant vineyards, stripped of fruit, radiated luxuriantly, as though free to photosynthesize for themselves without threat of human poaching.

There was only one stop sign in town. The church occupied a corner of the intersection, a pub the corner diagonally from it. Delheim was divided by the road between the two, as the vineyards on either side of the Rotenbach were divided by the bridge, their only link.

Christian knew he had to return to work. There were more floors to mop, windows waiting to be washed, looks of curious pessimism from Immanuel to endure, and invasive questions from family members to sidestep.

Did he make the right choice in coming here? Of course he did. Anything was better than The Corners. But was anything better than this?

He didn't know anymore. Following his incarceration, which followed his childhood, he had no scale with which to compare experiences. Was this as good as it got? A choice between mopping one kind of floor or another? Surely winemaking wasn't his mission in life, but what was? And how does one discover it? How do you know when you're happy, or even content?

He found himself standing before the front entrance of the church, staring at the great wooden doors. He paused before entering. He sensed an emptiness inside the building. Stained glass, rows of pews, maybe an odd visitor or two. But no answers.

He looked across the river at the vineyards again, and saw Immanuel wandering among the vines. He seemed to be talking to himself. Though the church may have been empty, the vineyard contained an unidentified presence. The individual vines all swayed to the same mysterious tune, and somehow Immanuel knew the words to the song.

A movement beyond the church cemetery's stone wall caught Christian's eye. It was Violet, spying on him. Her dark eyes peered over the wall. When she realized she'd been discovered, her eyes widened and she ran away.

Chapter Six

Over the next several days Christian learned his true mission at the winery, why Immanuel needed him. Although wine flowed freely and easily through hoses, once bottled it had to be carried from the bottling station to the warehouse. From the warehouse to the front porch. From the front porch to waiting automobiles. As the current vintage fermented, the previous year's vintage was distributed to thirsty customers.

They called at all hours, and many came from other towns. Each milliliter of wine produced and sold had to be stacked and carried. Christian hauled bottles here, he hauled them there. Sometimes he hauled them to the same place he'd picked them up. He incrementally decreased the entropy of wine in the universe, until the wine's maker, Immanuel Dessoir, was satisfied with its geographic distribution.

Violet took to Christian. She followed him about the property, sat next to him at meals, and smiled shyly whenever he bothered to notice her presence—which apparently wasn't often enough. Sometimes she sat on the heater in the vat room, reading from a book, peeking up every few minutes. When Christian happened to look in her direction, she smiled her patented, crooked smile.

Sometimes she acted the hellion, running through the vat room, disdainful of rules and obstacles. Sometimes she put on makeup and dressed beyond her years.

She wanted to be older. She couldn't wait to become older. She hovered around adults, mimicking their behavior, gazing in admiration at the clothes the women wore, the cigarettes held casually between their fingers.

She seldom interrupted Christian during his work, but once she said, "I know a German sentence."

"Do you," Christian replied.

He was mopping the floor. He was always mopping the floor.

"*Wie geht es dir*," Violet said.

"Do you know what it means?"

"No, but it's German."

"Why do you follow me around?"

The abruptness of the question startled Violet. She stammered, "You ... make me happy."

"How?"

She fidgeted. "Just by entering the room."

A month into Christian's stay, after he had loaded a customer's trunk, the customer, Mrs. Stein, asked Immanuel, "May I have your boy for some chores? I need some heavy lifting."

"Of course." Then to Christian: "Ride home with her and do whatever she asks."

"I'm not a boy," Christian said. "And I work for you, not for every Henry and Hannah in town."

"I *am* every Henry and Hannah in town," Immanuel said.

Upon arriving at her home, Mrs. Stein handed Christian a garden fork and said, "Weed the flowers." The sweet demeanor she had displayed in Immanuel's presence had gone on holiday.

"I thought you needed heavy lifting."

"No, but I can find you some, if you're hankering to do it. When you're done weeding, of course."

Back at the winery Christian said to Immanuel, “You knew what she wanted me for, didn’t you?”

“She’s a good customer. I’ve weeded her flowers myself a few times.”

“I spent the afternoon bent over. That’s becoming a pattern around here. Tell me, are you trying to teach me humility? Because you can’t shake a stick at my former masters.”

“No. Well, yes. Maybe.”

“I learned humility at The Corners,” Christian said. “Humility is pretty much all they taught.”

“I’m sure you’re right.”

“There isn’t going to be a whole lot of dignity in this job, is there?”

“The dignity is always in the man, never in the job.”

After pressing, they had bags filled with leftover grape skins, or pomace, and now they trucked them back to the vineyard and spread them like fertilizer. Christian’s muscles ached once more. He told Immanuel he was happy the hard labor was over for the season.

“The field work never ends,” Immanuel replied. “Pruning comes next.”

*

Immanuel regularly checked the wine’s alcohol content with a vinometer. He also sampled the wine by syphoning it from the vat into a shot glass. Sometimes he invited Christian to climb the ladder and taste it too. It was milky, greenish, gaseous, and sweet.

“The cloudiness is the yeast feeding on sugar,” Immanuel explained. “The yeast was already on the skins of the grapes when we harvested them. Sometimes we have to add yeast, to bolster a slow fermentation. But not this time. This time the wine is going to be great all on its own.”

Christian tried to taste the future greatness, but all he could think of was the millions of microscopic creatures swimming in the mire.

Within a day or two of crushing, the vats had started to bubble, and now they were churning vigorously. The fermentation showed no signs of tapering off. Airlocks gurgled. The fiberglass sides were warm and the room reeked of ethanol.

“Time to bottle,” Immanuel said.

“But it’s still fermenting!”

“Tell that to the Federweißer customers. We’ll just bottle a few cases. They’ll sell out within a couple of days.”

Immanuel bottled the Federweißer himself, with a tabletop machine that filled four bottles at a time. He showed Christian how to operate the machine, and while Christian bottled, he placed a sleeve of aluminum foil over the top.

“You don’t use corks?”

“Not for this stuff. They’d just blow off as the wine inside the bottle continued to ferment.”

“How long will the other wine remain in the vats?”

“Until the secondary fermentation is done, when the wine is perfectly still.”

After carrying cases of Federweißer to the warehouse, Christian went to work again cleaning. Immanuel had strange notions about how clean even the inside of a garbage can should be.

“A winery must be spotless,” he said, too often for Christian’s tastes. “The chief cause of failed wine is contamination.”

Funny, Christian thought. An analogy could be made for people too.

Chapter Seven

November. The few grapes still on the vines were cocooned in fungus and harvested for their Noble Rot. Leaves turned pale with fleeting hints of green. Some were already shriveled, turning from yellow to brown, curling at their edges and growing brittle. Half were already on the ground, leaving vines stripped of their pride.

The canes drooped; they'd done their work and were tired. The distant hills were mottled with a patchwork of earthy rectangles. Now that most of the foliage was gone, the rows were more discernable, the colors muted.

The temperature dropped and a stillness settled over the vineyard. Immanuel showed up in Christian's room one morning and signaled for him to follow.

"Grapes only grow on second-year wood," he said, trudging between two rows of vines. "So last year's canes must be cut away."

He stopped before a vine and handed Christian a pair of clippers.

"Leave two healthy canes, as close to the trunk as possible. Prune them back to ten buds and stretch them out along the trellis wire."

He turned to leave.

“Wait,” Christian said. “That’s it?”

Immanuel turned back, took the clippers from Christian’s hands, and quickly pruned a vine to demonstrate his verbal instructions. When he finished he handed the clippers back.

“That’s it,” he said. “Do them all that way.”

Christian glanced around at the local landscape, taking note of a disconcerting absence of fellow humans.

“But there are thousands of these things. It’ll take me weeks. Months.”

Immanuel glanced around too, as though scoping the vineyard for the first time.

“Yes,” he said.

He left.

Christian began tentatively, worried he’d ruin the vines. He selected two canes shooting out of their spurs. They were close to the head, healthy looking, and thin. The others, the woodier, less attractive canes, he snipped away. He “trained” the chosen two in separate directions, tying them securely to the wire, careful to keep the buds free.

He counted buds: “One, two, three...” and made his final snips before continuing to the next vine.

“One down,” he said aloud. “A million to go.”

His confidence grew. He found he enjoyed the work. First, because he was making decisions that would affect the quality of the wine, that would make a difference; he was doing more than mopping a floor. Second, because he didn’t have to think.

A crow flew overhead and called out a lonely note. Its shadow crossed Christian’s position, blinking out the sun for an instant, spreading its wings and expanding its command of the sky. Once again Christian felt what he had previously classified as an “un-

defined presence” in the vineyard, as though the static vines, the quivering canes, and the taut wires were occupied by a ghost.

He heard footsteps and turned to look. Gabi had tracked him down.

She asked, “Who’d you have to know to get this job?”

“Your father. He’s a generous man. Doesn’t like to hog all the work.”

She looked down at Christian’s feet, which were already little more than amorphous clumps of mud. “Or all the dignity, apparently.”

“Ah, there’s the thing. He tells me the dignity is in the person, not the job.”

“I sure hope so.”

Several dozen rows higher, Immanuel was visible strolling through the vineyard. With few leaves remaining on the vines, they no longer concealed a man’s presence. Immanuel wandered from vine to vine under the midday sun and seemed to be talking to himself. Or to the vines.

Gabi followed Christian’s gaze. “Right, yes, Father’s haunts.”

“What’s he doing?”

“Visiting Mother.”

Christian raised his eyebrows.

“She died shortly after Violet was born. Father still thinks she inhabits the winery. He speaks to her. He believes she hears him. And each inexplicably misplaced tool or surprise discovery is Mother, up to her old tricks. She’s part of the fabric of the vineyard.”

“So he misses her,” Christian said.

“She was the love of my father’s life. Still is.”

“What was her name?”

“Aimee.”

“How did she die?”

Gabi looked Christian over and hesitated, as though evaluating his potential.

“How does anyone die?” she answered. “She went away.” Apparently reconsidering, she added, “She drowned during a flood.”

They both watched as Immanuel stopped and stared up the hill. Whether at vines higher up, the cresting topography, or the low hanging clouds, they couldn’t tell. His hands were in his pockets, and he stood very still.

“Follow me,” Gabi said. “I want to show you something.”

She led Christian back to the house, up the stairs, and into Immanuel’s bedroom. Framed on the dresser was a portrait of Aimee. Christian took it in his hands while Gabi studied him.

Aimee was a vibrant brunette with shoulder-length curls and a mischievous smile. She had the classic beauty of a former generation. Or maybe it was just the hair style. Still, Christian easily placed her in his mother’s generation, the distinctive curls and red lipstick defining her era. She stared directly at the camera, and her subtle smile hinted at a punch line she had yet to deliver.

Gabi came alongside Christian and looked at the portrait. After a moment she asked, “Do you enjoy spending Friday nights in your room, reading books? Or should I say, ‘book,’ since you seem to own only one?”

“So you’ve searched my room.”

“‘Searched’ is a strong word for it. But yes, that’s what I did.”

“I like reading. I like it more than pruning, and a lot more than mopping.”

“What do you like more than reading?”

“I don’t know. Getting massages is high on the list.”

“What is higher than reading and lower than massages?”

“Are you asking me out on a date?”

“Of course not, silly. I’m asking you to ask me out on a date.”

Immanuel entered the room. He glanced from Christian to Gabi and back again. He took cursory note of the portrait in Christian’s hand. He turned to Gabi.

“Your grandfather is dead.”

Chapter Eight

The church overflowed, with mourners crowding the standing-room-only space in the back and spilling into the street outside. Christian followed Immanuel and his three daughters down the aisle and entered a reserved pew. The small room echoed with hushed whispers and feet scraping the stone floor.

Christian leaned toward Gabi and whispered, “Judging by the turnout, your grandfather was much loved.”

“No, the church is just too small. All the funerals are this crowded.”

She stood to speak to someone in the pew behind them, and Violet nudged her way over and took her place next to Christian.

August Dessoir’s family arrived next. They trudged up the aisle in single file, led by August himself, and occupied the reserved seats on the opposite side. As August passed, he nodded formally at Immanuel, who nodded back.

Bringing up the rear of August’s procession were several hefty men. Violet named them to Christian: “That’s Vance, that’s Sebastian, and that’s Niels. They work for Uncle August.”

All three glared at Christian as they turned to enter their pew. Immanuel leaned over and whispered something to Violet, who passed it to Christian: “Keep your distance from those boys.”

Next to enter the church were August's oldest son Thomas and his wife Alexandra. They entered solemnly, their heads bowed, and took seats with the rest of the family.

Immanuel's mother Angelika, newly widowed, entered the church last, and alone. She strolled the aisle like a bride without a father to give her away, took a seat across the aisle, and prayed fervently, her eyes closed and her hands clasped, rocking slightly forward and back as though in a religious trance.

"Is your grandmother okay?" Christian whispered to Violet.

"Yes, she's just a follower."

"A follower?"

"Grandma believes in God."

"Oh. And you?"

Violet smiled playfully and looked away.

The priest entered to organ music and opened the service. "We are gathered here to bid farewell to Hans Dessoir, and to commit him into the hands of God."

*

After the service the congregation marched in a procession to the cemetery across the street, at the only intersection in town with a stop sign. The stop sign wasn't necessary today; everyone in town and in the villages nearby attended the funeral.

The casket, which had been on display in front of the altar during the service, was now carried by six strong men to the grave. Angelika walked directly behind it, her head lowered, her feet shuffling in apostolic piety.

"I am the resurrection and the life," the priest recited grave-side.

The mound of dirt next to the grave was covered by a green tarpaulin. Funeral attendees filled the walled-in cemetery.

The voice of the priest carried over a modest breeze and the rustling of the trees. “He that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die.”

The coffin was lowered into the grave. The breeze stiffened, and Christian saw Immanuel’s gaze wander to the vineyards across the river.

“May his soul and the souls of all the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace.”

Mourners lined up to pass before the grave and sprinkle dirt into it with a small garden spade. Angelika paused the longest, her head bowed and her eyes closed, her lips moving silently and rapidly.

As people drifted out of the cemetery, the immediate family remained in a tight circle around the grave. Vance, Sebastian, and Niels all glanced suspiciously at Christian as they took leave, and Christian sensed the family wanted to be alone. So he took his leave as well.

Violet followed him, after looking at her father, who subtly nodded his approval. They took a walk together down to the river.

“How are you holding up, pipsqueak?” Christian asked.

“I’m fine. It was Grandpa’s time.”

They walked in silence for a minute. Christian said, “I’ve always wondered: how do you know it’s someone’s time?”

“Because he dies.”

They found a quiet spot on the riverbank and sat next to each other in the grass. The vines across the tributary made swishing sounds as canes rubbed against one another in the gusting breeze. The leaves had all turned and fallen, having led the

vineyard through its ochre and umber paces before returning to the soil.

“Do you think your mother is up there?” Christian asked. “In the fields?”

“I think she’s everywhere.”

“Your father visits her among the vines.”

“Yes, that’s where they talk.”

“And you?”

“She tucks me in at night.”

“What’s the story about your Uncle August? I’m told he and your father don’t speak.”

“They don’t. They haven’t since Mother died. Grandma lives with Uncle August because she took his side in the dispute. He owns the next vineyard over. It’s more successful. Of course, he doesn’t limit yields. Like Papa does.”

“That’s why they hate each other?” Christian asked. “One makes more grape juice than the other?”

“No, they hate each other because they both loved the same woman.”

Chapter Nine

Christian continued his work at the winery, growing increasingly impatient with manual labor. “When do I learn wine-making?” he asked Immanuel regularly.

“When you’re ready.”

He pretended to ballroom dance with the mop when no one was looking, performing spins, dips, and even taking a stab at the Lindy Hop. Gabi walked in on him one day, and he hung his head in embarrassment.

“I know,” he said, “I should be mopping, not playing.”

She approached him, removed the mop from his hands, and let it drop on the floor. She raised her arms in a posture that said, “Dance with me.”

Christian took her in his arms and they started a waltz.

“Longer steps,” Gabi said. “The steps are long in a waltz.”

“Got it.”

“Also, don’t look in the direction you’re turning. Always look over my right shoulder.”

“Is this a dance lesson?”

“Yes. Now, when my left foot goes forward, your right foot goes back.”

They practiced simple turns for a minute until they achieved a smooth gliding action.

"I'm impressed," Gabi said.

"Because low-lives have no culture?"

"I didn't mean that."

They stopped and stared into each other's eyes, then let go of each other and looked away.

"I'd best get back to work," Christian said.

"And I—I have things to do, too."

*

Christian chose to spend his breaks taking walks in town, during which he looked for evidence of Immanuel's dead wife Aimee in the vine-draped hills across the river. But in Immanuel's absence, Aimee always seemed to be napping.

He wandered among the tombstones in the cemetery across the street from the church until he found hers. Aimee Dessoir, it said, on a polished granite slab.

A stillness cloaked the cemetery, yet Christian didn't feel alone. He had never felt alone in cemeteries. He spoke aloud: "Aimee?" but his outreach met with silence.

Violet made a pastime of spying on Christian. Or maybe it was an avocation. He caught her peeking through windows as he worked inside the winery, always vanishing when he raised his head and looked. When he took walks in the woods around Delheim he sometimes noticed her following him, always many paces behind, hiding inefficiently behind scant shrubbery.

He relented and gave her his time. They played badminton on the street in front of the house. Violet wound up for each swing, as if to send a scorcher, but missed the birdie by as much as two feet. It didn't faze her. She swung just as confidently, and incompetently, at the next birdie.

They went swimming together. Violet liked to be thrown into the air to splash cannonball-style in the water, and to be

spun round and round in an inflated tube. She shouted, "One more time! One more time!" until Christian spun her again, and she shouted it yet again.

Some nights he tucked her in. He planted a kiss on her forehead. She closed her eyes and smiled.

One day returning from a walk together Christian recognized two men standing in front of the house, watching as he and Violet approached.

"You get inside," he said to her.

"Is everything all right?"

"Everything's fine. These two men just want to talk to me."

Violet ran indoors. A moment later Christian noticed she was watching from an upstairs window.

"Hello, Christian," one of the men said. He was fat, with dark eyes, and greasy hair of uncertain color, a kind of dirty blond. He was dressed intentionally shabby, with shirt untucked and faded jeans with holes in the knees.

"Kyle," Christian said. "You didn't waste much time finding me."

"Had to do a lot of asking around, as a matter of fact. When Pascal here told me you were a winemaker, I laughed so hard, beer spewed out my nose."

Pascal was slight of build with brown eyes and a baseball cap, worn backwards, to hide his premature balding. He shifted his weight from foot to foot.

"So anyway," Kyle continued, "how long is this gig going to last?"

"I guess as long as Ramirez wants it to."

"Mickey Ramirez," Kyle laughed. "You've come down in the world if you do what that pathetic excuse for a man tells you to do."

“If you and Pascal hadn’t outrun me, you’d be picking grapes too.”

“If you’d followed us, you wouldn’t be picking grapes either.”

“Look, what’s this about? Why are you here? To ridicule me?”

Kyle looked at Pascal, then back at Christian. “We need you for a job.”

“No.”

“All you have to do is drive. You don’t even have to enter the store.”

“You can’t get into the store without me. That’s why you’re here. You don’t need a driver, anyone can do that. You need someone who knows how to open the door.”

“Not if it’s a smash-and-grab.”

“If you’re planning a smash-and-grab, you might as well grab a mop and join me as a pretend winemaker. That is, after serving your time.”

Kyle shrugged. “Well, you have me there. We need your help on the inside. Your take will be half this time, instead of a third.”

“And if I’m caught again? And sent to prison? Will you serve half my time for me?”

“Yes or no, Christian.”

“No.”

“So you’re going native. Gonna spend the rest of your life with dirty fingernails and grass-stained knees.”

“After The Corners, it’s a welcome change.”

“Help us affect some redistribution of wealth, in the form of gemstones and precious metals, and you won’t have to live like this.”

“No.”

Christian turned away. As he entered the house he looked up. From the window above, Violet was still watching. The window was open. She'd heard every word.

Chapter Ten

At dinner Christian and Gabi stole glances at each other. Gabi had altered the seating arrangement so she could sit next to him. Their elbows touched casually. When their knees made contact, Gabi kept the pressure against his, and Christian responded in kind. He tried to concentrate on his food. He looked at Immanuel, who stared into his plate and said nothing.

After dinner Immanuel took him aside and said, "I'd prefer you keep your distance from my daughters. I thought I'd made that clear."

Christian responded, "You don't want trash like me soiling them? Is that what you're saying?"

"That is exactly what I am saying."

They were in the fermentation room. Casks gurgled all around them and belched carbon dioxide.

"So it's not about character, it's about personal history. It's about my past."

"Your past is part of who you are. Behavior reveals character."

"What about redemption?"

"You haven't yet paid your debt. You haven't earned your citizenship. When you have, come talk to me about redemption."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence."

"You're an apprentice, Christian. Act like one. And get used to being treated like one."

"Actually, I'm just a janitor. At least an apprentice would be learning something."

"Character comes from within," Immanuel said. "You first need to—"

"Stop right there," Christian cut him off. "You're my boss, not my Zen Master."

Immanuel looked long and hard at the young man. He said, "Come with me."

"Where are we going?"

"The Zen Master is introducing you to The Temple."

*

Immanuel took Christian to Der Weinstock, the town's only watering hole. A combination bar and restaurant, it resembled a Gasthaus from the old country, so the townspeople referred to it as such.

"People are buzzing about the new guy working for me," Immanuel said. "Let's give them a chance to meet you."

"They're buzzing because I'm a criminal."

"Maybe. But keep that chip on your shoulder and they'll buzz even more."

The two sat before half-liter glasses of Weizenbier. A few townspeople stopped by to say hello, to stare curiously, to measure Christian. Mr. Grimm, who operated a small winery as a hobby, looked upon Christian with envy, wishing he had a "boy" of his own. Mr. Faber shook Christian's hand energetically and launched into a monologue about the superiority of the Riesling grape. Mrs. Waldorf sized Christian up and declared that after a few weeks of eating Claire's meals he'd no longer need to run around in the shower to get wet.

Christian saw the depth in their eyes, the windows to “the birth of viniculture,” as Ramirez had put it. They apparently saw no such depth in his eyes; they looked at him as though fixating on the wall behind his back.

“Why all the Riesling worship?” he asked Immanuel. “Isn’t it just another type of grape?”

“On one hand, yes, it’s just a type of grape. On the other hand, it can do something no other grape can do as well: it can make super-sweet dessert wines, wines so phenomenally sweet, they can pass for nectar.”

“Don’t most people prefer dry wines?”

“Have you ever had a Beerenauslese?”

“I’m not even sure I can say it.”

“We’ll see what you prefer, after you’ve tasted one. In earlier times, when sugar was a rare commodity, people satisfied their sweet tooth with sweet wine. When done right it’s as close to perfect as wine gets.”

“You’re a perfectionist.”

“I don’t call it that.”

“What do you call it?”

Immanuel finished his beer and ordered another for both himself and Christian.

“When I was a boy,” he said, “there was a carpenter in Delheim who made exquisite cabinets. He had two sturdy sons who helped run the business. They were so intent on making the best cabinets that could be made, and getting them into the homes of people who appreciated them, they they eventually went bankrupt.

“The two sons moved away, one to New York, one to Australia. And the father ended up on the street. Passersby spoke to him of his ineptitude for business, of his foolishness. His eyes

always lit up, shined out from his grubbiness, from his wild unkemptness, and for a moment he came alive. He answered, ‘But we made good cabinets, didn’t we?’

“That’s all a man can say at the end of his life, or upon the exhaustion of his fortune. I did it well. I did it right. I did it the best way I knew how, the only way it could have been done—didn’t I?”

“It’s just wine, Mr. Dessoir.”

“True, and they were just cabinets. And when an architect erects a cathedral, it’s just a building. See that man over there?”

Christian looked and saw a bearded man with moist eyes sitting by himself in the corner, nursing a glass of wine.

“That’s Tullius. He spent his career laying tiles. Once I ran into him in Napa. I happened to pass a bathroom being remodeled in some government building or another. He was on the floor, laying tiles. I stopped for a moment to watch. At one point he reached back to a tile he’d laid a minute earlier and made a small adjustment. I couldn’t see the difference afterwards. But that wasn’t the point.”

“What was the point, then?”

“*He* could see the difference.”

“That’s it? That’s what a man’s life is worth? To make sure the tiles are straight? To make sure the wine tastes good?”

Immanuel’s expression was blank. “You’re not ready to hear the complete answer to that question.”

“Ah, my Zen Master plying his trade.”

“When you’re ready, we’ll talk. Meanwhile attend to the details of your job. Attend to them as though success depends on them.”

“Like the missing horseshoe nail that caused the war to be lost?”

“If that works for you, yes, attend to the horseshoe nails. The rest will come in time.”

Three men entered the Gasthaus, laughing boisterously. They were burly, bearded, coarse, and outfitted almost comically in flannel shirts. Lumberjack types. Christian recognized them from the funeral: Vance, Sebastian, and Niels, although he couldn’t remember which was which. It took him a minute to recognize them because at the funeral they’d been dressed ... funereal. They took a table nearby and loudly ordered beers.

“I take it you’re not going to introduce me,” Christian said to Immanuel.

“No, not to these blokes. They’re members of August’s crew. We don’t play well together in the same sandbox.”

“August being your brother,” Christian prompted him.

Immanuel sipped his beer and nodded. “Older brother. We had a disagreement over a lady. The lady, my wife, died eight years ago. The animosity lives on.”

“He can’t simply accept that Aimee chose you over him?”

“You know more than I thought you did. Things are complicated by the fact that Aimee was still technically his girlfriend at the time she accepted a marriage proposal from me.”

“Ah. That will threaten even a brotherly relationship.”

One of the lumberjacks pointed the neck of his beer bottle at Immanuel and said, “Look what we got here.”

The other two followed his gesture and smiled icily. The largest of the three was a man whose belly betrayed his beer consumption, and whose eyes darted uncertainly. He said, “Is that your new bitch, Immanuel?”

“Ignore them,” Immanuel told Christian, loud enough for the men to hear. “It pleases them to make noise.”

The three men looked at one another, and Christian noticed them nodding subtly.

"Tell me, Immanuel," the largest one said. "What kind of grape are y'all growing over there?"

"You know damn well what kind. Now mind your own business, boys, and don't start any trouble."

"I heard it's Thompson Seedless. Isn't that right, Vance?"

"It would explain a lot," Vance said, "wouldn't it? They should be making raisins, not wine."

Christian glanced at Immanuel, who shook his head.

"That would indeed explain it," Immanuel said. "Now let me buy you boys a beer."

"The fellow you have with you," the large man said, nodding at Christian. "He looks like a city boy. Where'd you pick him up?"

"Sebastian, don't start any trouble."

Christian said, "He picked me up off the ground."

"Off the ground?"

"Yeah, keep talking trash, and you'll find out what the world looks like from down there."

"Enough!" Immanuel placed his hand in front of Christian's face, as though to block further words from spilling out. "Let's everyone just enjoy our drinks in peace."

"Yes," Sebastian said. "Let's allow our friends to enjoy their Thompson Seedless wine."

The third man spoke up. "I hear in Europe they distill Thompson Seedless for fuel. Is that what you do, Immanuel? Or do you just make vinegar out of it..."

Christian started to rise, but Immanuel clamped down on his shoulder and forced him back into his seat. He turned to the third man and said, "Niels, you can insult me, you can insult my

ancestors, you can even insult my dog. But don't you dare insult my wine."

"Right, Niels," Sebastian nodded gravely. "Show some respect for the vinegar industry."

At first Christian didn't move. Immanuel was watching him closely, as though ready to grab him and hold him back, if necessary. But Christian remained still, by all appearances stoical to Sebastian's taunts. He surprised everyone by lifting his beer glass and proposing a toast.

"Here's to vinegar," he said.

"To vinegar!" Sebastian repeated. He leaned back in his chair to swallow a gulp of beer.

That's when Christian lunged. He was so fast, Sebastian's beer bottle was still tilted toward his face as he was hauled out of his chair and thrown to the floor.

The other two men were up immediately. Christian dispatched them with lightning blows to their heads. Immanuel tried to intercede, but was crowded out by a rapidly assembling gallery.

"What are you doing?" he yelled at Christian.

"Attending to details."

Sebastian was back on his feet. He took a wild swing at Christian and missed. He stepped forward and swung again.

Christian backed up each time, remaining out of reach. Finally Sebastian charged, his arms flailing. Christian dodged the swings and hit Sebastian once, twice, three times in the gut, each time harder than before. The big man didn't have time to collapse under one pummel before absorbing another.

After the third blow Sebastian was teetering in a crouched position. Christian grabbed him by the arm and turned him around. He twisted Sebastian's arm behind his back and

wrenched it up violently. A sickening crack penetrated the commotion in the room.

By this time the other two men had returned to the fight, noses bleeding. They tackled Christian from behind, and all three crashed to the floor. As the one named Vance held Christian down, the one named Niels rose to his feet and kicked at Christian. Repeatedly, out of control. As though the man he was kicking would rise and kill him if he stopped.

Meanwhile Immanuel had worked his way through the crowd. He gave Niels a stiff shove and sent him reeling against the bar. He dragged Vance off of Christian. Vance took swings at him, but Immanuel blocked the blows with his arms. Then Vance got a punch through, to Immanuel's face, and staggered him.

Mr. Tullius, the retired tile layer, broke through the gallery and stepped between the two men.

"Gentlemen!" he shouted. "This is not the way civilized men behave!"

The uncivilized men stood still for a moment. Then fighters and spectators alike returned to their tables. Immanuel helped Christian to his feet. The young warrior's face was cut, his nose was leaking blood, and his lips were swollen.

Immanuel took him by the arm. "We're going home," he said. As the two exited the Gasthaus he added, "We shamed ourselves tonight."

Christian said, "Yeah, but we kicked ass too, didn't we?"

They were walking down the sidewalk, and it was several seconds before Immanuel answered. "That, indeed, we did," he said. "Now everyone in town will be buzzing about you."

Christian came to an abrupt stop. "Wait one second. You knew a fight would break out tonight, didn't you? You were testing me!"

Immanuel shrugged. "Maybe a little." Then he laughed.

"What's so funny?" Christian demanded.

"I don't even own a dog."

✱

Claire met the two gladiators at the front door of the house.

"Mrs. Waldorf called and told me to expect you," she said. "This is disgraceful. This is absolutely disgraceful. You two gentlemen clean yourselves up this very minute."

In his room Christian found Gabi glancing through his papers. He recognized them as legal documents concerning his conviction and incarceration, and the terms of his early release. She'd been going through his things, and seemed unconcerned about being caught snooping. Instead, as he watched, she continued to turn pages, raising her eyebrows over certain entries.

She glanced up at Christian, saw his beaten-up appearance, and blinked.

"Just for my edification," she said, "did Father try to stop you?"

"Tried and failed."

"You've been tested. If he'd wanted to stop you, he would have."

She rose and went to the door, where she turned and said, "You truly are a bad boy, aren't you?"

"The worst."

On her way out she said, "Just my type."

Chapter Eleven

It was time, Immanuel said, for Christian to learn the finer points of winemaking. Christian figured it had to consist of more than putting grape juice in a tub and letting little bugs feed on it. Immanuel shared what he called the four pillars of wine: fruit, spice, balance, and alcohol. He and Christian walked side-by-side along the row of casks.

“Wine should taste like fruit,” Immanuel said, “because it is born of fruit. Too many growers put alcohol first, believing the higher the alcohol content, the better the wine. Or at least the more they can charge for it. As though wine drinkers are looking to get drunk.”

“Aren’t they?” Christian asked. “Most of them?”

“Some of them. We don’t cater to those drinkers. Maybe the aim of vodka drinkers is to get drunk, but wine drinkers are looking for an experience, one that doesn’t cause them to slur their speech after two helpings.”

“How much alcohol is ideal?”

“It depends on the character of the wine. In general, the more subtle the wine, the less alcohol it can support before the taste of ethanol overpowers the fruit. We’re shooting for twelve-and-a-half percent, which is respectable for white wine. Most vintners would consider a red wine with so little alcohol to be a failure.”

“But not you.”

Immanuel leaned against a cask and lit his pipe. “No, not me. Twelve-and-a-half percent is plenty enough for any purpose, even for robust reds that can handle more. But my friends making Cabernet and other red varietals are shooting for fourteen and even fifteen percent, and the taste of ethanol is unmistakable. So much so, the product no longer tastes good, or even, some of it, like wine. You want your wine balanced: not too much of any one ingredient, including alcohol.”

“And spice?”

“The difference between a good and a great wine. Take the peppery flavor of Chateauneuf du Pape, from Syrah and Grenache grapes. The cause is a compound known as rotundone, which gives the same peppery flavor to pepper itself. Gewürztraminer contains the word “spice”—Gewürz—in its very name. All of these, including the unique flavors in Riesling, are the result of esters, terpenes like rotundone, and other organic compounds that give fruits and plants their unique flavors.”

Immanuel explained that spices were also passed to wine by oak barrels, although he didn’t believe in polluting wine with “wood juice.” Nor did he have any patience for pretentious characteristics, the stuff that couldn’t actually be tasted, that were only imagined. Butter. Tobacco. Toast.

“The notion that if it’s in the soil, or growing nearby, somehow its flavor will make its way into the final product, is bullshit. Why does a kiwi taste like so many different things, depending on what’s on your mind at the time? Wine works the same way.”

“The French claim it’s the soil,” Christian said.

“Of course they do. Otherwise fine wine could be made outside of France.”

“Does wine really improve as it ages? Or is that a hoax too.”

“It’s largely a hoax. Red wine made with so much tannin that it’s undrinkable when bottled should just be made differently. As for white wine, the fresher and crisper, the better.”

Christian watched one of the airlocks. Bubbles were rising through it at the rate of about one a minute. He placed his hand against the fiberglass side. It still felt slightly warm.

“It won’t be long before you’ll be drinking that,” Immanuel said. “We just need to let the critters eat more sugar first, to get the alcohol content above twelve percent.”

Christian imagined pouring bags of sugar into the vat to help the process along, and it occurred to him to ask Immanuel why not—why not just feed the yeast what it wanted? After all, farmers fertilized their crops. They fed their plants what they needed to grow and produce. But Immanuel was gazing lovingly at his critters, as he called them, and Christian didn’t think it was the proper time to question his technique.

*

Christian worked. His single motivation was not to appear weak or incompetent to Immanuel. He inspected the vats carefully to ensure the wine was behaving properly. He double-checked that every piece of equipment was spotless. He swept, he mopped, he scrubbed. He read books on winemaking. Everything the library had.

Some wine from the previous vintage was still in the vat, and it had to be bottled. He and Immanuel operated the four-at-a-time bottling machine. Empty bottles moved along a narrow conveyor. They were first sparged with nitrogen, to prevent oxidation, then filled with wine by valves lowered into the necks. The two men inserted corks manually with hand corkers, after first soaking them in water.

“You have a machine to bottle,” Christian said. “Why don’t you have one to cork too?”

“The more you do with your hands, the better the wine. Besides, doesn’t this act of finality give you some satisfaction?”

The bottles had to be labeled. Again by hand, by pinching the labels in the middle and swiping their backs with glue.

Christian used the forklift to transport the cases to the warehouse, which he had nicknamed “the barn,” and found space for them among the empties, the returned bottles waiting to be sanitized before reuse.

When there wasn’t anything in the winery for Christian to do, Immanuel put him to work in the garden, or sent him to some widow’s place—once just to change a ceiling light bulb.

Customers came by the house at all hours to buy wine. Sometimes one would ask, “Can I have the use of your boy?” Immanuel was all too happy to grant use of his boy. Nevertheless Christian’s education continued.

“Wine is a living commodity,” Immanuel told him. “Other food is dead, and is to be consumed dead. It has been killed or harvested. But wine represents a rebirth of the grapes, a transformation into something new, something marvelous and mysterious and evolving. When we drink it, we join with it. It becomes part of us, materially and spiritually.”

Christian had been a suspicious member of the family, and the community, until the Gasthaus fight. After which the Dessoir family, and the townspeople loyal to it, began to look upon him differently. He knew his reputation was at stake. And he was painfully aware that nothing in his past, nothing he’d ever before accomplished in his life, would improve anyone’s opinion of him. Their opinions, and his standing in the community,

depended solely on how conscientiously and industriously he served Immanuel and his winery.

He wondered if he was experiencing what outsiders, people who had never been locked up in places like The Corners, considered rehabilitation. Among a people to whom capacity for hard work was one of the highest virtues, if not the highest of all, he was starting to fit in.

Mrs. Stein, whose garden he had weeded under her uncompromising supervision, came by to purchase some wine. As Christian was loading the case in her car, she handed Immanuel a package wrapped in aluminum foil.

“Strawberry cheesecake,” she said. And after a moment’s hesitation, “For the boy.”

Chapter Twelve

December came to the valley. After his long workdays, while light remained in the sky, Christian strolled down to the river, sat on the bank, and watched the current. He gazed across to the vines climbing the opposite bank, using slate for footholds. He liked watching how the individual vines shook in the breeze, each one unique in behavior as well as appearance.

Their leaves were gone. Their trunks and branches were naked, dark, and wet, twisted and writhing in the absence of cloaking foliage. The hills were earthy, drab, draped in fog, like silk, like down.

The sky grew dark a bit earlier each evening and the vines became more diffuse in the fading light. Immanuel was often out there, wandering the rows in the semi-darkness, standing still for long minutes. Christian knew if he were close enough, he'd see his lips moving as he spoke to his dead wife.

One evening Immanuel joined Christian at the riverbank after work and sat quietly with him for a few minutes.

"She's there, you know," he said. "I feel her presence."

Christian didn't need to ask who. He chewed on a straw of grass and thought: if it comforts you to believe it.

*

Gabi made herself more visible. At first she disappeared as soon as she realized Christian had noticed her. Then she adopted the practice of hesitating long enough to shoot him a “look.”

He took the initiative one morning when he saw her walking alone to the river, having embarked on her outing by strolling past his window and pausing in front of it longer than necessary. She went down the gravel path, occasionally glancing back, until she observed him following her. Then she didn’t look again. It was time to be coy.

She sat on a flat rock on the bank and pretended to reflect upon matters, until she heard his footsteps behind her and turned in surprise.

“Oh, it’s you,” she said. “What are you doing here?”

“Accepting your invitation.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Unless I misunderstood, in which case I’ll respect your privacy and return to the house.”

Christian turned and took a step back up the gravel path.

“Wait.”

Gabi stood up. Christian turned back around and planted himself in front of her. She lowered her head.

“Was there something you wanted to tell me?” he asked.

She shook her head.

He lifted her chin up with his fingers and kissed her. Her lips were soft and hungry. Her body felt wonderfully warm against his. He pressed her to himself and sank his mouth into hers.

It had been a long time since he’d been with a girl. The skin of her bare arms and shoulders, of her cheeks, was velvet, warm and cool at the same time, pliable, strange and familiar at the same time.

After what seemed like an hour, but must have been a minute, Christian pulled away and opened his eyes.

From a block away, partially concealed by a tree, Violet stood rigidly, watching.

*

That afternoon Christian helped Immanuel syphon last year's vintage from one vat to another, leaving the lees behind. As yeast organisms died they fell to the bottom of the vat. The wine had to be separated from the lees, or "racked."

They first inserted a long tube into the vat, one that reached to its bottom, where the lees rested. Attached to the tube was a "spear," essentially a stick that jutted a few inches past the end of the tube, to keep the end above the lees, so they didn't get sucked up.

Immanuel turned on the pump, and wine flowed through the tube, passing through a sight glass. They could watch the flow and make sure only clean juice completed the journey. The other end of the tube was already inserted into the clean fiberglass vat.

After pumping was complete, the bottom of the old vat was unplugged, allowing the cloudy remnants to spill onto the floor and go down the drain.

Immanuel took this time to also check the carboys, the individual five-liter bottles filled with wine that didn't fit into a vat. One that was only partially filled he found spoiled, due to contact with air, and he poured it down the drain as well.

"That's one," Immanuel said.

Christian looked down the row of vats and said, "Bring on the rest."

He hosed down the now-empty vat and sealed it for future use. They would repeat the racking process as necessary, until the wine was clear.

After dinner Gabi took Christian aside and said, "We need to talk."

They went for a walk in town, where they met other townspeople. The men tipped their caps, if they wore one, the women nodded and smiled. All inspected the pair a little too closely for Christian's comfort.

"They're checking us out," he said. "They want to know why you're cavorting with riff-raff."

"Specifically criminal riff-raff," she said. "I have questions..."

"Oh?"

"Why did you do it?"

"Do what, precisely."

"You know what. Break the law. Go to jail."

"The latter was involuntary. You realize that, don't you?"

"Don't joke about it. I'm serious. I want to know why you don't obey the law."

They turned a corner and stopped before the church. It seemed to Christian like a good place to confess.

"I've been asked many times," he said. "By authorities of one kind or another. Psychologists too; as a juvenile offender I was viewed not so much as a hardened criminal, rather as a kid who veered off the path."

"Did you? Veer off the path?"

"I guess the more meaningful question is, did I veer off a path that was meant for me to walk. I hate all this metaphorical stuff, by the way. I stole jewelry. I got caught. It's that simple."

"Why jewelry?"

"Because it's valuable. It's portable. It's easy to fence. Because stealing money itself is much harder. Ask any bank robber."

"Then I have to ask the obvious question."

“How could I be so stupid as to get caught?”

“Okay, two questions. Mine was going to be, how could you be so lazy as to steal rather than earn?”

“Ah, now you sound like all the others who’ve interrogated me.”

“I don’t mean to interrogate you. I just want to understand.”

“Why?”

“Because I like you. Is that so hard to work out? And because I like you, I want to know more about you, what motivates you to do these things.”

“To have done these things, would be more accurate. And I’ll tell you, because I like you too, Gabi. I stole rather than earned because I never discovered any labor worthy of my time. All the labor I’ve ever done, including what I do now, serves someone else, not me.”

★

Christian and Gabi arrived back at the winery. By this time they were holding hands. They found Immanuel in his “office,” which was nothing more than a desk and filing cabinet huddled in a corner of the vat room. He leaned over the desk, thumbing through the winery’s books. Standing next to him was Claire.

Immanuel looked up at Christian and Gabi as they entered and said, “Claire and I are having a private conversation.”

“No, that’s okay,” Claire said. “Gabi needs to hear this too.”

Immanuel looked pointedly at Gabi’s hand, still clasped in Christian’s. He raised his eyes to Christian, but said nothing.

Claire stood erect and still before her father, as though presenting herself for an interview. She was dressed formally as usual, in a long skirt and decorative apron.

“Papa, I know you want me to take over the vineyard,” she said. “Later, when you ... go to Heaven.”

“Is that so.” Immanuel returned his attention to his books.

Claire took a deep breath. “Nolan wants to marry me. I want to marry him.” She fidgeted. “We want to marry each other.”

“Nolan ... the barber?”

“No, silly.” Claire looked around in exasperation. “Nolan the dentist. In Napa.”

Immanuel waited.

“I want to be a homemaker, Papa. I want to be a mother.”

Immanuel scribbled a figure, erased it, and scribbled another. He still didn’t look up.

“Be a good one,” he said.

Chapter Thirteen

It was only a shadow at the window of the vat room, but Christian immediately recognized the man who made it. The recognition was instinctive, and he resisted the impulse to bolt.

The shadow moved across the window, as though the man were pondering whether to look inside, show his face, make himself visible to anyone on the other side of the glass. Or go around to the front and ring the doorbell. Or perhaps even chicken out and leave.

Christian left the vat room through the rear door and walked around the house. It was Ramirez, all right. By this time the uninvited visitor had shed his qualms and was bending over to peer through the window. Squinting. Turning his head left and right like a curious dog. His eyes were flashlights probing the darkened room, failing to find Christian among the gorged wine vats.

“I’m here,” Christian said, from behind him.

Ramirez turned, startled. “I thought maybe I could get your attention, and the others didn’t have to know I was here.”

“But you are here.”

“Yes, but no one else has to see me. I don’t know what your situation is with them.”

Ramirez hadn’t changed. Still the prison superintendent, still the military posture. Still flashing a smile. A little nervous today,

because he was outside the prison walls rather than inside, sitting at his throne, a terrified boy shivering in front of him. No reinforced door separated him from whatever sodomy was taking place out of earshot.

“Let’s go for a walk,” Christian suggested.

“You want to go for a walk with me?”

“As long as I have to talk to you, I might as well enjoy the weather.”

They headed toward the river. It was a walk Christian had taken with Immanuel, with Immanuel’s daughters, even with Immanuel’s diseased wife, apparently. And by himself, many times. Now he was taking it with his former jailer.

As they approached the river, Ramirez glanced up at the vineyards on the other side.

“They’re beautiful,” he said. “Symbols of life, nourishment, fertility. Vintners live longer than average. Did you know that?”

Christian shook his head.

“There’s a reason,” Ramirez said. “Not only does wine improve with age, so do the people who make it.”

“Unless they tumbled down one of those slopes,” Christian said. “Almost happened to me a few times.”

“Almost got the shit kicked out of you too, the other night. Or so I heard.”

“Almost.”

Ramirez pointed across the river. “Those the ones you work?”

Christian nodded. “And those, and those, and those.” He pointed at hills up and down the river. “And those.” He pointed to the houses in the town. “Your friend Dessoir lends me out to the old ladies.” Following a pause he said, “Not for the reason you think.”

“Of course. He’s just trying to be a good member of the community, you know. As are you, I hope.”

“Have you heard otherwise?”

“Other than the fighting, no. I’ve only heard good things about your work in the community.”

“Then why did you come?”

They stopped at the bank of the river. Ramirez picked up a rock and tried to skip it, but it wasn’t flat enough and kerplopped in the water.

“I hear other things,” he said.

“What things.”

“Things about you entertaining questionable visitors. About you considering questionable business undertakings.”

He was talking about Kyle and Pascal. But how could he possibly know they visited him?

“A couple of goons came by,” Christian said, “and I sent them packing.”

“And if they come by again?”

“I’ll send them packing again. Are you here just to warn me to behave? Didn’t you communicate that message at The Corners, before I left?”

“I’m here because of a hunch. I’m here because I fear your attitude is precarious. I’m here because I worry you’ll find a way to screw this up. No matter what’s handed to you, no matter how good it is or how costly the platter it arrives on, you always manage to screw it up.”

“You’d love to see me fail, to see me back in The Corners, wouldn’t you? You’d love to see my rump humped some more.”

“Christian, if only you knew how much I wish I could send all the boys home, and turn The Corners into an empty compound, a tumbleweed farm.”

“What would you do then? You were born for that job. You’d be out on your ass.”

“Maybe. Maybe I’d do what I’ve always wanted to do, since I was a boy.”

“Yeah? And what is that.”

Ramirez picked up a flatter rock, wound up, and threw it across the surface of the river. This once skipped twice, three times, four times, before spinning down into the blue-gray water.

“What you’re doing now,” he said. “I went through a similar program when I was your age. You’re following my footsteps.”

Christian looked away.

“Now you know why I chose this place,” Ramirez continued. “And why I have some insight into your situation. Whether you care to believe it or not, I too was a so-called delinquent.”

Christian stiffened at the sound of the word.

“That’s right, a delinquent. Own the label. Own it until you earn another. You’ve spent your whole life running from challenges. This job is an opportunity to change.”

He turned and headed back to the house, leaving Christian behind. After a few steps he stopped and faced him again.

“While you’re at it,” he said, “don’t fuck up the lives of these people. I care about them, and I’ll need them again. Someday another angry young man will follow *your* footsteps.”

Chapter Fourteen

Claire and her dentist man got married. She wore a traditional white gown with a long train. He squirmed in a black tux while waiting at the altar. When the music started up it was so sudden than he flinched. A portent, Christian thought, of storms to come.

She walked up the aisle holding the arm of Immanuel, who deposited her briskly at the altar and took his seat. During the ceremony he stared straight ahead stoically.

Christian sat next to Violet, as he had during her grandfather's funeral. Gabi sat on Violet's other side. Christian could tell she was upset, and he knew why. He'd been avoiding her. He was happy to have Violet between them, serving as a buffer.

After the ceremony Gabi pointedly ignored him. He paid all his attention to Violet, who wore the biggest smile in the room. They all stood outside as Claire and the dentist rode off in a car, amid clamor and rice, tin cans rattling behind.

Immanuel watched his oldest daughter drive away, out of his life. Then he turned to Christian and said, "We have work to do."

*

It turned out Gabi wasn't ready to give up on Christian. She sat next to him at meals again, or tried to. She checked in on him while he worked. He grunted one-syllable responses to her

questions. Finally she cornered him in his room, blocking the door as he tried to exit.

“Okay, fine,” he said. “You want to hear it?”

“Yes, dammit. I want to hear it. I want to hear it all.”

“I don’t want to ruin your life.”

“Whatever gave you the silly idea you had the power to ruin my life? Besides, my life is mine to ruin, not yours.”

“Your father, for one.”

“Oh, don’t pay any attention to him. He’s all bark and no bite. And he’s just trying to protect his daughters.”

“Right. From monsters.”

“That’s it? My father disapproves, therefore we can’t be together? I’ll be a spinster if I wait for my father’s approval of someone, anyone at all.”

“My parole officer also disapproves.”

“I didn’t know you had one.”

“I don’t, not really, but he’s in charge of the ... facility ... where I was incarcerated. And he’s the one who arranged for my early release. He could put me back in that facility with one phone call.”

“And he disapproves of me?”

“He doesn’t want me screwing up the family. He considers me a juvenile delinquent. All grown up, but still. He has the same opinion of me as does your father. As does everyone who’s ever known me. And you want to know something? They’re right. They’re all absolutely right.”

“They’re right only if you make them right.”

“Did you pay attention during your sister’s wedding ceremony?”

“What are you talking about? Of course I did.”

“Do you think those two will be happy?”

“That’s a silly question.”

“Answer it.”

“Their happiness is theirs to achieve. It has nothing to do with us. Besides, I’m not asking for your hand in marriage, just for some of your time. Just for an opportunity for us to share things with each other.”

Christian brushed past her. “You’re better off finding a dentist of your own.”

✱

Winter dragged on. The vineyards hibernated; still, silent, and a little spooky. The hills bore no fruit, and the birds abandoned them. At the end of January mustard season began.

Christian cleaned. He cleaned floors with an ammonia solution, equipment with sodium bisulfate. He washed dishes when it was his turn. Immanuel was a taskmaster; everything had to be clean, clean, clean! Christian aped him behind his back, to the amusement of Violet. He crouched and dragged his knuckles, and made her giggle.

“Clean, clean, clean!”

One morning Christian demanded, “Teach me something new. If I keep scrubbing this place I’ll scrub it out of existence, like a cartoonist erasing a drawing.”

Immanuel blinked and looked off at nothing, presumably trying to imagine his house and property disappearing under a cartoonist’s eraser.

“What would you like to know?” he asked.

“Anything. How to stop a fermentation. How to cure a hangover.”

“I’ve never had a hangover.”

“Dammit, Old Man. You have thermometers all over the place. What is their importance? At what temperature does wine ferment best? Am I getting through to you?”

“Come with me,” Immanuel said.

Christian followed him into the fermentation room. Immanuel pointed at a strip thermometer adhered to a vat.

“The best temperature to ferment white wine is as close as possible to eighteen degrees, without going over. It’s the key to a great Riesling. There, now I’ve taught you something. Get back to cleaning.”

“But I notice you don’t heat or cool the vats. Or the room.”

“No. The room is the right temperature for the vats.”

“How do you manage that?”

“The geographical location is the right temperature for the room.”

“And I supposed the planet’s position with respect to the sun...”

“Is right for the geographical location. You’re catching on. If you want to grow Riesling, there are two places on Earth best suited, better suited than any other. The Old Country, specifically the Rhein and its tributaries, and right where you’re standing. The necessary strains of yeast already flourish in the vineyards, where they’ve evolved over the centuries. It’s already on the skins when the grapes are crushed. Anything else you do to the wine isn’t really winemaking, it’s playing with a chemistry set.”

“You truly love this, don’t you?”

“You have to love something. You have to have something you devote yourself to. My passion is great wine, and I’ll achieve it any cost.”

“Even if it means operating the winery at a loss.”

“Even if it means sleeping in a ditch. Because the only meaningful form happiness can take is peace of mind. And the only practical way to achieve peace of mind is through dedication to your work.”

“Dedication doesn’t preclude innovation,” Christian said.

“Meaning exactly what?”

“A little sugar would push your Spätse to an Auslese.”

Immanuel was silent for a moment. He said, “The lesson is over. Go mop the floor.”

“Everyone else is doing it. Why shouldn’t you? Why shouldn’t you compete favorably with your neighbors? With your brother August?”

“It’s illegal,” Immanuel answered. “More importantly, it lacks integrity.”

“Why shouldn’t you have wine as good as everyone else’s?”

“Because I don’t want it as good. I want it better.”

“It couldn’t hurt to make a little money, you know. To at least charge more. Perception is the better part of reality. People who pay more for wine think it tastes better, regardless of whether it really does.”

“I make wine, not perceptions of wine. And yes, it could indeed hurt, if doing so made me unhappy.”

“There you go again with happy. There’s no such thing. People who want to be ‘happy all the time’ only make themselves miserable trying.”

“You’re right, in that there’s no such thing as happiness if it’s defined as a constant state of emotion, higher than average. A norm exists between happy and sad, between ecstatic and miserable, and a typical person experiences the whole range, more or less periodically, throughout his or her life. If one could be ‘happy all the time,’ to put it your way, one could only do so by

raising the norm—and consequently falling below it regularly. That’s why, again as you say, they make themselves miserable trying.”

“So why bother trying?” Christian asked. He was genuinely curious. Eager for an answer. He felt as though he were standing before a mountaintop guru, awaiting the delivery of wisdom. But the man before him was a grape grower, with dirt under his fingernails, one who rarely uttered multisyllabic words one after another.

“Why bother with a passion?” Christian pressed him. “Why go through the trouble?”

“Happiness is most usefully defined as peace of mind,” Immanuel said, “which is the habit of accepting things the way they are, of taking the bad with the good and knowing that not every experience will be a positive one. It’s a habit practiced by people who know their place in the world and occupy it. Who pursue their passions despite obstacles and setbacks, pain and frustration. Often without even being aware of the negative aspects. The more beautiful the rose, the more bearable its thorns.”

He looked Christian in the eye. “Happiness is a choice. One you, young man, have yet to make.”

Chapter Fifteen

On Violet's tenth birthday her sisters made her a cake and invited all the children her age from the town. The Dessoir house filled with enough giggling and screeching to give Christian a headache.

Gabi approached him several times during the party, each time less subtly than before. Christian avoided her, in equally subtle maneuvers, and gave all his attention to Violet instead, despite his headache and a desire to escape to the tranquil outdoors.

All gathered in the living room for the opening of presents. Violet wore a white dress and posed shyly for the cameras going off around her. As she opened her presents she noted, in a dry academic tone, that disconcertingly few consisted of cash, and her father scolded her for it.

Christian had bought Violet something he could scarcely afford, a necklace with a small green stone pendant. The jeweler had told him the metal was 10 karat gold, and the stone was natural jade, but he questioned both claims.

He connected the clasp behind her neck. She beamed as though the piece was one of the British crown jewels.

Gabi cornered Christian and spoke bluntly. "You're still avoiding me."

“Not really. I’m just paying attention to Violet. It’s her day.”

After the other children had left, Christian invited Violet out for ice cream. Immanuel, Gabi, and Claire, who was visiting for the day, accompanied them. Violet acted like she was on a date. She sat next to Christian, occasionally allowing her shoulder to accidentally brush against his.

Gabi sat apart from them and stabbed at her ice cream, contributing little to the conversation, which was mostly about how Claire fared in her new life.

At the end of the day, as Christian said goodnight to Violet, she hugged him, held him for several long seconds, then scurried off to her room

*

On Sunday Christian was alone in the house. Immanuel was in the vineyard as usual on Sundays, when it was empty of people and he could enjoy privacy with Aimee. Violet was visiting friends.

Gabi was off on some secret mission. She had been acting strangely lately. Earlier that morning she’d been especially tight lipped. Something was going on, and she would share it when she was ready.

Christian entered the living room and looked out the windows to make sure no one was coming, to make sure he had at least a few minutes alone. He sat down at the old upright piano shoved against the wall and lifted the fallboard. He resisted a natural urge to play scales. Natural because they’d been drilled into him. “You have to be able to play them in your sleep,” his mother had said. “They’re the foundation for everything that follows.”

Unfortunately little had followed. When his mother was institutionalized and he moved to a foster home, it didn’t have a piano. And later, The Corners was as musical as a galley ship.

He compromised and played one scale, the C Major, crossing over with his thumb on the way up, with his middle finger on the way down. He could hear his mother's voice: *Smooth, as though you have six fingers on each hand.*

The piano was slightly out of tune. His ear caught it, but it probably didn't bother anyone else in the house. He'd ask Immanuel for permission to tune it. Then again, doing so would reveal something about him to Immanuel, who was more comfortable believing Christian incapable of anything but breaking and entering and mopping and fetching.

He sensed a shadow and looked up. Violet was watching him. He hadn't heard her enter the house.

"You play piano?" she asked.

"Not well."

"Show me."

He patted the side of the bench next to him. She sat down. He paused for a moment, then launched "Ode to Joy" in C, which was the key he had just dusted off. Beethoven wrote it in D, but C would be easier for Violet to play. He used only one finger at a time on each hand.

"Now you," he said.

He moved aside, and she placed her fingers where his had been. Afterwards he said, "That was good. You've been studying?"

"Not yet. Papa thinks I'm too young. Or at least he did the last time I asked."

"How old were you?"

She thought about it. "Four? I don't like to bother him."

"You're never too young."

Christian clamped his mouth shut when he realized he was contradicting the girl's father, his boss.

“Will you teach me?”

“If your father says it’s okay.”

“Where did you learn? In prison?”

Christian stifled a laugh and recalled his mother’s drunken voice: “Wash behind the ears, and practice your scales.”

“I had lessons when I was younger,” he said. “Do your sisters play?”

“Not the piano. Claire plays the clarinet, or used to, anyway. And Gabi ... Gabi is only interested in boys.”

“I’m interested in other things too.” The words came from the entrance to the living room, where Gabi had been listening.

“I didn’t mean...” Violet stuttered.

“I know. Don’t worry about it, honey. And to satisfy your curiosity,” she directed her attention to Christian, “Mother played the violin. She played beautifully.”

Gabi left. Violet said, “I need to go to my sister,” and followed.

Christian placed his fingers on the keys to perform “Ode to Joy” one more time, but interest failed him, and he retired to his room.

★

Christian admitted to himself that he was actively avoiding Gabi. Gabi, for her own part, seemed to have given up on the relationship.

He and Violet practiced the piano together. At first when no one else was around. Then, as Violet’s skill and confidence grew, they pressed the keys no matter who else was in the house.

The first time Immanuel heard them, he entered the living room and stood still, listening. Christian waited for him to object. Surely he’d come up with a reason. But he said nothing and walked away quietly.

Violet picked up on music quickly. Clearly a passion had been smoldering inside her, and she'd been waiting for an opportunity to kindle it. Christian recommended she seek a professional piano teacher. But she insisted on learning from him.

Wash behind the ears, and practice your scales.

One day after practice Violet dragged Christian outside. "Let's check the vines to see if they're budding yet."

"Should they be?" Christian knew it was too early in the year.

"Any day now. It's my favorite time of year."

"Why?"

"Because it means spring is here. Regardless of what the calendar says, the vines know better. I check for buds every day."

The vines were bare. Tendrils clung purposelessly to the wires. The grass and mustard between the rows were lush, but the grapes were dormant. There were no buds.

"Maybe tomorrow," Violet said.

At dinner that night, during desert, Gabi made an announcement.

"I'm leaving soon," she said.

All stopped eating and looked at her. Except Violet, who stared at her food.

"Where are you going?" Immanuel asked.

"I want to travel. I want to see the world. I feel trapped here. Sorry, Papa, but I don't want to farm grapes all my life."

Christian set his fork down. He too stared at his plate.

Immanuel sized up his middle daughter. "Where will you go?"

"San Francisco. I've responded to an advertisement placed by a family in the city. I'm going to be an *au pair*."

"You're only fifteen."

"I turn sixteen next week. I can do what I want."

“What about school?”

“I’ll go to school. Or I’ll be home-schooled by the family. Or I’ll get my G.E.D.”

Immanuel returned to eating. “And this is how you will see the world? By scooting over to San Francisco and working as a babysitter?”

“*Au pair*. It’s a start, Papa. The first step I have to take is away from here.”

“Away from us.”

“Toward something different. I have to set out in some direction, or else I’ll go crazy. I want to be an *au pair*.”

They sat in silence. Finally Immanuel said, “Be a good one.”

Violet spoke up. “I’ll stay with you, Papa.”

All now turned to her.

“I want to stay here forever. With you and Christian. I want to be a winemaker, just like you, Papa.”

Christian knew what Immanuel’s answer would be. The old man didn’t care whether anyone followed his path and continued the family business. It was up to each individual to determine and embrace her own passion, and whether others made the same choice he did, even others in his own family, was inconsequential to him.

“Be a good one,” Immanuel said.

Chapter Sixteen

On his way out of the warehouse the next morning Christian ran into Gabi.

“What are you doing here?” she asked him.

“I work here.”

“Yes, but I mean in this particular room.”

“Cleaning.” He held up a garbage sack. “It’s one of my many trades. And this is one of the many rooms in which I practice it. Or did you hope I was following you?”

“You don’t have to be a jerk, you know.”

“I know. You don’t have to chase all your whims, you know.”

“You’re mad about what I said at dinner.”

“I’m mad that you didn’t warn anyone in advance. To prevent them from choking on their dinner.”

“I didn’t know how to say it.”

“You found a way.”

“There’s nothing for me here, Christian.”

“Just because we’re not romantic doesn’t mean you have to leave.”

“It would help to know *why* we’re not romantic. If it’s a simple lack of attraction, I can live with it. But I don’t think that’s it.”

“We’ve already had this conversation.”

“Oh yes, I remember. Because you’re not worthy. Your injured self esteem doesn’t allow you to show affection.”

“Careful, Gabi.”

“Christian, if staying means seeing you on a regular basis, I have to leave.”

★

Gabi left. She did it early one morning without notice or ceremony, before the family had risen for breakfast. She left a note on the dining room table: “I love you all. Please water the spider plant in my room.”

Immanuel held the note in his hands for more time than he needed to read it. Then he set it back down on the table and ate his breakfast.

Christian, Immanuel, and Violet took what Violet called their “spring walk” among the vines. She had snuck out the day before and verified it was time. Leaves were just beginning to bud on the vines. The buds were small, soft and bluish-gray, mostly just wooden nodules. Christian could hardly see them. The emerging green material was tiny and delicate, spiraling out like blossoms. Violet glanced back and forth between Christian and the blossoms, grinning.

Each gnarled trunk stretched grotesquely upwards and extended a pair of naked canes. The canes were like withered arms, reaching forlornly for some unknown desire. Yet throughout the vineyard was a sense of anticipation. The grass grew higher. Mustard season was over.

The vineyard was coming alive. Christian could feel it, could smell it. All the senses were put to work in a vineyard. The odor of greenery, the brightness of sunlight, the dance of butterflies. Birdsong, the gentle touch of the breeze. Dandelions and forget-

me-nots growing in clumps between the rows, like wild candy dishes.

That night, while Christian was tucking Violet in, he bent to kiss her forehead as usual. This time she moved her head suddenly, bringing her lips in contact with his.

He pulled away. They stared at each other in the near darkness.

Violet closed her eyes and smiled.

Christian turned out the bedside lamp and left the room.

*

Christian knew what it was called: chaptalizing. And that it was illegal. He only did it in one vat. More than one, and Immanuel would have been suspicious.

So what if one vat turned out to have more sugar than the others? Who would guess why? The grapes came from a different part of the vineyard, one with better drainage and more exposure to the sun. Thus it produced a more dehydrated and sugar-concentrated grape. What reason would Immanuel have to be suspicious?

Too little alcohol in wine was bad for several reasons. Such wine was prone to infection by alcohol-tolerant microorganisms, and sulfites needed to be added. But mainly, low-alcohol wines were considered failures, by both winemakers and wine drinkers, and they commanded lower prices.

A Riesling needed to achieve at least 12% alcohol by volume if fermented to dryness. Immanuel's wines, with a specific gravity under 1.08 and brix shy of 19, were unlikely to achieve 11%. Yet his brother August's wines routinely succeeded. How could that be, if his vineyards occupied essentially the same geography?

It was obvious to Christian what August was doing. He was chaptalizing.

Christian waited until the winery was empty. Violet was in school and Immanuel was running an errand. He poured five-pound bags of sugar into one of the vats, the one containing grapes from an upper slope that Immanuel had always hoped, in vain, would produce an Auslese.

When he was finished, he bunched up the empty bags and stuffed them into a plastic garbage bag, to discard in secret.

Chapter Seventeen

The phone call was for Christian. It was the first he'd received since arriving at the Dessoir estate.

"Hello Christian. It's Kyle."

Christian froze.

"Not going to say hello to an old friend?" Kyle asked.

"You're not my friend."

"Well, then, how about partner?"

"How about we just skip the labels. Unless you want to change yours to Judas."

"It's your own fault you got caught, Christian."

"What do you want, Kyle?"

"Wesselton Rand in San Francisco. You know the place."

"I know the place. And the answer is still no."

"It's an inside job, Christian, a simple smash-and-grab. An employee is going to disable the alarm and security cameras. We'll be long gone before the donut patrol shows up. It'll be the easiest job of your career. We just have to cut the employee in afterwards."

"Listen, Kyle."

"Pascal will drive this time and serve as lookout. You and I will grab. You know jewelry. You know what not to waste your time on. I have a diagram of the display cases, provided by the

employee. I tell you, this is an easy one. We'll divide the store in half and be out of there in three minutes."

"You can't do it in three."

"Okay, four. You're the boss."

"Four is long enough for staff to memorize your face."

"We'll wear ski masks. We'll make the employees face the other way while we work. I'm telling you, Christian, this is candy from a baby."

"Someone will have a panic button."

"According to my guy, there's only one in the shop, and it's in the center island. It will be disabled."

Christian allowed himself to think about it. If Kyle was right, it was easy money. The kind you pick up off the ground, the kind you don't pass up on principle. He knew Kyle well enough to know he was a careful operator. He wouldn't risk jail time for a single sack of inventory. And he was right when he said getting caught was Christian's own fault. If he had spilled the sack from the last job, if he had scattered it like bait down the sidewalk, he would have gotten away too.

He imagined Immanuel listening in on the conversation, shaking his head, disappointed that Christian would even consider the undertaking. He imagined Violet looking up at him with her soft brown eyes, questioning wordlessly why a man she admired so much chose to live his life as a hoodlum. Chose to make yet another mistake.

He also imagined his fists closing around a pile of diamond solitaires.

"Kyle..."

"Yes?"

"No."

“Have it your way. You have some time to change your mind. Meantime I have no choice but to shop for a replacement. I’m sure you understand.”

“I understand.”

“There’s only so far you can run, Christian. No vineyard is going to change who you are.”

“Goodbye, Kyle.”

“Goodbye, Christian. I hope you reconsider.”

*

A few mornings later, Immanuel roused Christian out of bed.

“Follow me,” he said. “Stick right next to me.”

His voice was loud enough for Violet to hear. She too jumped out of bed and followed the two into the fermentation room. Immanuel pointed at one of the vats, which was gurgling vigorously.

“What do you know about that?” he asked Christian.

The other vats were quiet by comparison. Christian knew Immanuel would run through all possibilities, including malolactic fermentation—which wasn’t that vigorous—and all sorts of things that could have gone wrong, before concluding the must had inexplicably acquired more food to eat, thus reactivating the yeast.

“Looks like we’re going to get an Auslese after all,” Christian said. “Count your blessings, Old Man.”

Immanuel grabbed a syphon hose, dipped one end into the vat, and held the other end over a drain in the floor.

“Don’t, Papa,” Violet said.

“I was down at Winkler’s, and guess what he told me.”

Christian turned away and looked out the window.

“He told me how curious it was that Christian bought five-pound bags of sugar from him. If they were for baking, I’d like to see all the cookies.”

Christian remained silent.

“No answer? Ah, then we know where the sugar went.” He began syphoning. Wine flowed from the vat to the drain.

“Papa don’t,” Violet said.

“Honey, it’s been altered. It’s illegal. It’s bad. It’s twelve hundred liters of fraud and obscenity.” He looked pointedly at Christian. “It’s everything wrong with the world.”

When he finished, he fetched a broom and mop and handed them to Christian.

“You mean I’m not fired?” Christian asked.

“Worse,” Immanuel said. “From now on, these are your only tools, your only companions. Obviously you’re going to have to learn things the hard way.”

Why should this episode of my life be any different? Christian thought. He knew he’d exercised questionable judgment, nevertheless he thought Immanuel should have let this one slide. But Immanuel’s ruling passion was honest and authentic wine, and he would pursue it, as he had said many times, at any cost. Even if it meant pouring an entire vat down the drain.

“And by the way,” Immanuel said, “you’ve stumbled upon the third enemy of wine: an incompetent winemaker.”

After Immanuel left the room, Violet said, “Papa is the lake.”

“What?” Christian was staring absently at the broom and mop. “The lake?”

“Yes, Papa is the lake. You’re the river.”

★

The next day, after the others had left, Christian slipped into Immanuel’s room, which contained an antique armoire, a dres-

ser, a nightstand with magazines and reading glasses. A bible, and nothing else, inhabited the drawer of the nightstand. A quick inspection of the armoire revealed only clothes and shoeboxes.

He opened a few of the shoeboxes. They were filled with receipts and other uninteresting paperwork. Immanuel lived an austere, almost ascetic, life.

“You should have been a monk,” Christian said out loud.

The dresser drawers were filled with underwear, socks, and ... bingo. Christian paused, looked over his shoulder, and listened. He was still alone.

A jewelry box nestled incongruously among the fabrics. It was the one artifact in the room that didn't match the rest. The idea of the old man wearing jewelry of any kind made Christian smile. But he knew it couldn't be Immanuel's jewelry; it had to be Aimee's.

He opened the box. It contained trinkets of various kinds, but as it turned out, nothing terribly valuable. An old pocket watch, frozen at 7:23. Zinc and iron coins from the years following the first world war. Cuff links, tie bars. Immanuel wore neither. Christian guessed Aimee's valuable jewelry had been distributed to the girls. Oddly, there were scattered faceted gemstones in the bottom of the box, but upon closer inspection they turned out to be colored glass.

The one item of theoretical value was a locket and chain. Christian inspected the maker's mark on the clasp: 18 karat gold. He opened the locket.

On the right side was a picture of Immanuel, looking unbefittingly young and happy. Christian guessed the picture was taken on his wedding day.

On the left was Aimee. He had seen her picture before, but this pose was more expressive. She had soft features and dark,

vibrant, shoulder-length hair. A big, almost mischievous smile lit up her face. Eyes wide open, radiating openness and authenticity. A lust for life. A beauty more characteristic of a former generation. The daughter who resembled her most, Christian decided, was Violet.

He agonized over the locket, fingering it, glancing over his shoulder into the empty hallway. Finally he returned it to the jewelry box and closed the drawer.

He took a long walk in the vineyard. The vines soaked up the sun. Their buds were opening, the leaves uncoiling and broadening. He pictured Aimee walking among the vines, as she must have done when she was alive. If she loved the vineyard as much as people said she did, as much as Immanuel did, she spent as many waking moments as possible wandering its rows.

Christian couldn't get her picture out of his head. Nor could he find the right adjectives to describe her beauty. Classy, elegant, European, royal; none seemed entirely appropriate.

He felt her presence around him. But it wasn't the presence of a person, certainly not a living person, yet not a ghost either. It was nevertheless a sentient spirit. It had a message for Christian, maybe for anyone who walked among the vines. He couldn't discern its meaning. The vines only rustled slightly in the breeze and soaked up yet more sun.

Christian returned to the house and entered Violet's room. He lifted her phone and dialed a number.

"Kyle," a man's voice answered.

"Christian," Christian said. "I'm in."

Chapter Eighteen

Christian, Kyle, and Pascal sat in a parked car around the corner from Wesselton Rand. The car windows were tinted, for which Christian was grateful, and the license plates were fake. If cameras watched them, they were incognito.

Sitting in the back seat, Christian regarded his two companions in the front. He wondered if he'd ever before seen them from behind. That's the way the brain works, he thought. Just before taking a terrible dare, you study pointless things. You notice minutia that otherwise would have escaped your attention.

Kyle's dark greasy hair looked even darker and greasier from behind. His slovenliness was a perfected art: shirt untucked, buttons missing, seams torn. Christian was glad he couldn't look directly into Kyle's eyes, because he'd see the cynicism and recklessness, and worry too much that he was doing something stupid.

Greed works to a point, beyond which it just gets you into trouble.

Neither stupid nor greedy were adjectives he could avoid when regarding Pascal, either from front or behind. He fidgeted behind the wheel. You want your getaway driver to have a pulse of 72, even during a police chase. Pascal's unkempt hair and slightness of build failed to inspire confidence in Christian.

Pascal's eyes, visible in the rearview mirror, almost made him exit the vehicle and run.

They had cased the store, but only from the outside. They knew that after the job, video would be studied from weeks past, and they couldn't risk showing their faces. Christian had been inside a couple of years before. Given the expense of rearranging showcases—because overhead lights would also have to be repositioned—it was unlikely the store was set up differently today.

The interior was decorated with fake marble, which Christian's experience told him would frighten away the middle-class customers and appear tacky to the more affluent. The overhead lamps were too low and bright. The heat from the lamps would dry and eventually craze the opals, burn off the oils commonly used to enhance emeralds, and dehydrate the pearls. Not to mention the color of the amethysts would fade over time.

The jewelry displays were arranged symmetrically, and the cases were too crowded. They looked like pawn shop displays. Whoever designed the store didn't have a lot of experience. Probably a committee effort.

Christian could imagine conversations taking place inside the store:

"It doesn't fit."

"Okay, we'll size it for you." *Did you think we stocked rings in all sizes?*

"It doesn't look good on me."

"Let's find something that does." *For every scruffy mule there's a scruffy bush to tie it to.*

"I hear opals bring bad luck."

"Nonsense. I know a woman who bought an opal and won \$300 in the lottery a month later." *Forgetting to mention that her husband fell off the roof and broke his head the day after she bought it.*

"But it's not my birthstone."

“The association of gemstones with birthdates is only a tradition. You should wear what you enjoy.” *Actually you were never born. You were marooned here by space aliens.*

Kyle looked at his watch. “It’s time to relieve the rich of their burdens.”

“We’re not Robin Hood,” Christian reminded him.

“Leave the diamond case to me. That okay with you, Christian?”

“Fine. I’ll take the colored stones. I never met one I didn’t like.”

“Get the gold watches too.”

“Fuck the watches.”

Pascal said, “The watches add to the time—no pun intended—but not to the sack.”

“I already have a buyer,” Kyle said. “As for you,” he turned to Pascal, “you just keep the engine running. Concentrate on not fucking up.”

“Which one is the inside man?” Christian asked.

“Never mind. Treat them all the same.”

“You sure the alarm’s disengaged?”

“Yes. You should see the fellow light up when we discuss his cut.”

“I hope he lights up because there’s a bulb on inside.”

Kyle nodded to Pascal, who started the engine. They turned the corner and pulled in front of the store. The name of the business, “Wesselton Rand,” spread across the facade in gold letters.

The men hesitated a moment in the car. They could see customers and salespeople through the plate glass window. Kyle looked at his watch again.

“Now,” he said.

He and Christian pulled on ski masks and removed hammers from cloth sacks. They jumped out of the car and rushed into the store.

Kyle took a pistol from his sack and yelled, "Everyone on the floor! Face the other way!"

A half dozen shocked salespeople and customers froze for an instant, then uncertainly dropped to their knees.

"Look the other way, I said!"

A couple of them twisted around and corrected their positions.

Christian whispered to Kyle, "You brought a damn gun?"

"Get to work."

They bashed jewelry cases open with their hammers. Kyle went straight for the diamond solitaire case, his eyes glowing.

Christian approached a series of cases filled with colored stones. It was a security mistake to display all the value in a concentrated space, but it was easier to sell the stuff when you did. And Wesselton Rand had it all. Even citrine quartz, which they had labeled "Madeira Topaz." And smoky quartz, presented as "Smoky Topaz." The peridots, exquisite though they were, perched behind a card declaring them to be "Evening Emeralds" in a fine calligraphic hand.

The real emeralds made Christian's mouth water. Emeralds were more valuable than diamonds in similar quality, but were seldom found in similar quality. The aquamarines, another variety of the mineral beryl, were so uniformly and richly colored that Christian knew instinctively they'd been heat treated. Likewise the blue topaz, which was almost unknown in nature.

He made these observations while smashing glass. Now he fished around with his gloved hand for merchandise, glancing

up at a pair of cameras that seemed trained precisely on him. He hoped Kyle's boy had done his job and disabled them.

The noise of shattering glass startled the people on the floor. At least two of them were customers, and one woman appeared to be sobbing into the carpet. Three grown men, in suits and ties, obviously salesmen, remained still and calm. They knew what was best for them.

The last colored stone case shattered under Christian's hammer. He scooped rings, earrings, and pendants into his sack, anything of presumed value. He glanced over at the watch case, then at Kyle. Kyle was pounding away at an acrylic case that wouldn't yield to his hammer. Christian guessed that's where all the big stones were. He smashed the watch case open with one blow and filled his sack.

The sound of approaching sirens.

Kyle stared at the people on the floor, fiddling with his pistol. Did he want to shoot them? Christian wondered. How were the police notified? It could have been a passerby. It could have been anything.

As they exited the store, Kyle shouted back into it: "You fucked up, Miles. You thoroughly fucked up."

On the sidewalk they stood and watched their getaway car peel away without them, its tires squealing, the sound of sirens coming closer.

Kyle yelled after the car, "Get back here, you pussy!"

The sirens were now quite loud.

The two men tore off their ski masks and took off in different directions. Christian ran down the block and turned into a side street, his sack of loot slung over his shoulder. The sirens seemed to home in on him.

He ran up the steps of a church, pushed the doors open, and surveyed the near-empty nave, trying to catch his breath. A sign indicated confessions were in session, although no one waited in line at the confessional. The light was green.

Christian entered the confined space, dropped his sack on the floor, and knelt on the padded bench. He could see the priest, a hazy figure on the other side of the grille. The priest closed a book and set it down, then gave Christian his full attention.

For a moment there was silence. Christian realized he was supposed to start.

“Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned.”

More silence. The priest helped him. “How long has it been since your last confession?”

“Oh, yeah,” Christian said. “I forgot that part.”

“It’s okay. I didn’t.”

Christian immediately liked the man’s quiet demeanor. He couldn’t remember how long it had been since his last confession, but he knew he was expected to provide a time frame. Presumably so the priest could gauge how many sins had been committed, statistically speaking, and how mortal they were likely to be.

Such-and-such rate of badness, over such-and-such period of time, amounted in Christian’s case to quiet a lot of material to work with, and no doubt excessive penance. He decided to give the standard response taught in Catholic school.

“It has been one month since my last confession,” he said.

“I hardly think so,” the priest said.

Christian gulped. He was there to confess sins including lies, and he’d just told a new one.

“I can’t remember how long it’s been, Father. I’ve been working in a vineyard. And before that I was in juvenile detention.”

“What were you in for?”

“Theft.”

“Of something of value?”

“Yes.”

“Of great value?”

“Oh yes.” Christian tried to keep the pride out of his voice.

“Are you sorry for your sins?”

“I suppose. But I was caught, and the merchandise was returned to its owner, so as it turned out, I didn’t hurt anyone. Not really.”

“But you tried to.”

“Yes, I tried very hard.”

The priest stifled a laugh.

“I just need to know how many Hail Marys I should say,” Christian said. “Give me a number and I’ll get out of your hair.”

“It doesn’t work that way. You first have to acknowledge you did something wrong. Then you have to feel genuinely sorry for what you did.”

Christian pondered the matter. What he’d done was illegal, so it was wrong, he guessed. He got caught, so he was sorry he did it.

“It was wrong,” he said, “and I’m sorry I did it.”

“Do you wish to confess any other sins?”

“Yes, I stole even more merchandise. Today, in fact.”

The priest shifted in his chair. He was no longer laughing.

“You have to return what you stole.”

Sirens could still be heard in the distance, and Christian imagined they were all about him. Of course they could have been ambulances. But if he tried to make it home carrying a sack of hot jewelry, he’d run the risk of being incarcerated for many years, and no confessional could save him.

The plan had been for Pascal to drive him and Kyle to a deserted barn, bury the loot in a hole they'd already prepared, and come back for it after things cooled down. If either Kyle or Pascal were caught today, and fingered him, he'd better not have the merchandise in his possession, nor stashed anywhere incriminating, like at the winery. Besides, he had no fence he could trust. Kyle was supposed to take care of all that.

"I promise to do the right thing," he said to the priest.

The priest sighed impatiently and gave him his penance.

"Thank you, Father. Incidentally, I'm leaving something in the confessional. Please take a look at it before someone else enters the chamber."

"Don't tell me it's..."

"Consider it a donation to the church."

"Something of value?"

"Yes."

"Of great value?"

"Oh, yes."

"Go in peace, my son."

Christian exited the confessional, leaving his loot sack behind. There was no one waiting in line. He hurried outside without saying his penance.

★

The next morning Christian woke to discover Violet asleep on the floor next to his bed. She had brought her pillow and blanket and a stuffed bear, and had stretched out next to the bed as though trying to be as close to Christian as propriety would allow. Or maybe she was trying to block his path.

Outside, the rain was coming down in a torrent. Christian rose quietly and went to the window. The vines across the river were almost invisible in the mist. He thought of Aimee, and won-

dered how she fared in the heavy rain. He shook his head; dead people didn't suffer the weather like the living. Or did they? Was he becoming like Immanuel?

He packed a small bag. It contained all he owned. He hesitated, then knelt on the floor and planted a light kiss on Violet's forehead.

He looked around the room. The vineyard would go on without him. The wine would be made, the vintage would enjoy one legacy or another, and in his own small way he would be part of it. But he would do the Dessoir family a favor by not being part of their lives.

Once outside, he was immediately drenched in the downpour. The vines in the yard stood up confidently to the rain. Their leaves were unfolding, rich in chlorophyll, delicate yet secure. Grapes were already sprouting in clusters along fragile shoots. They were tiny green spheres, hardly bigger than sand grains.

Christian wiped his face and turned to look at the house one last time. After nodding a silent goodbye, he headed in the direction of town. That's when he saw the police officers.

They were fanned out at regular intervals, guns drawn. There was no point resisting or running.

He complied passively as they cuffed him and placed him in the back of a car. As the car pulled away, he looked at the house again and saw Violet watching him, expressionless, through the rain-streaked window.

Chapter Nineteen

San Quentin State Prison

Inmate #359195

Dear Christian:

I'm sorry it took so long to write. Papa won't let me visit, but finally he said it was okay to send letters. He said the guards will read them first. I don't like people reading my letters, but it's better than not writing at all.

You'll write back, won't you? I understand if it's hard, but please? They tell me you'll serve at least eight years. That's too long.

Also someone said I would have to send you stamps, maybe paper and envelopes too. Is that true?

I'm sure there are mistakes in this letter. Spelling isn't my best subject. I can do math, but I can't spell it, ha ha.

We're getting ready to harvest again. When I first met you it was during harvest. Eight years is too long but they'll go by. Well, seven-and-a-half now. I'll wait for you.

—*Yours truly, Violet*

Violet:

Don't wait for me.

—*Christian*

Dear Christian:

Gabi came home from San Francisco for a visit, and Claire drove up from Napa without her dentist husband. The family was together again, minus Mama, of course. And minus you.

We took a trip to Lake Berryessa to go boating. Papa borrowed a boat from someone. It had a motor in the back and we wore life jackets. Life jackets, on a lake. I thought they were only for the ocean. The boat was okay. It was loud though, and it bounced a lot on the water.

We went swimming too, and although the weather was warm the water was cold. Papa, Claire, and Gabi went all the way into the water, but I wouldn't go farther in than ankle deep because I was afraid of piranhas.

I know there aren't any piranhas in the lake, but still, I couldn't stop thinking about them, so I couldn't make myself go in. I figured if they came for me in ankle deep water, I'd have time to run away before they ate me.

Papa thinks this year's wine will be our best. It looks like he's got a good Auslese, finally, and he didn't have to sneak any sugar in to get it, ha ha. Sorry you weren't here to be part of it. He left a patch unpicked so we can try for Eiswein this winter. I hope I have the flu that day.

School is boring. I got an A in history and don't know why. I didn't do any homework. When I showed my C in art to Papa he said the teacher was probably an Andy Warhol fan. You know Papa. His little girl's drawings have to be the best in the school.

Do they let you draw and paint where you live now? Can you watch TV? Play board games? Have you made any friends? I know you like to play chess, and nobody here was interested. Or maybe they just weren't good enough. It makes me sad to think

of you sitting in a small room all day, staring at the ceiling. Can you at least go outside and get fresh air?

I'm sorry about joking about putting sugar in wine. I should be more careful about your feelings. Normally I would rewrite this letter, and take that stuff out, but I want total honesty between us.

So, here's some total honesty: I'm learning how to play chess. I'm learning it so you have someone to play with when you come home.

It's been almost a year already. It seems like forever. Please write to me. Please tell me how you're doing. I'm putting some stamps in the envelope. Don't let anyone else get them.

—*Respectfully, Violet*

Violet:

It's even worse here than it was at The Corners. I'm not going to talk about it. You're wasting your time writing to me.

—*Christian*

Dear Christian:

I know you said not to write, and I've held off as long as I could. In fact, six whole months. But I decided that if you don't want to write, you don't have to, and if I want to write, I can, and you can't stop me. And if you want to throw my letters away, I'll be sorry about that, but it's your choice.

Papa bought me a violin and he's making me take lessons. I told him I was happy with the piano, but he thinks violins are more ladylike. Besides, he said, everybody plays the piano. Or maybe his problem is that you do.

Also, he joked that it went with my name. Violet—violin. Get it? He threatened to stick me with the accordion if I didn't warm

up to the violin. At first I didn't believe him, but then he shopped for one. So I warmed up to the violin. I still practice the piano when he's not around. I miss playing with you.

Next thing he wants me to do is taking riding lessons. On a horse. He says riding lessons make a lady out of a girl. I'm just as happy to remain a girl. I think he's making up for having failed to do right by my two sisters. Neither studied the violin nor rode a horse, and therefore have fallen short of his vision for them.

I went through an old photo album, and guess what I found? Pictures of Mama playing the violin and riding horses. Not at the same time, of course. So that's what he's trying to do. Reincarnate Mama.

I wish you would talk to me. I want to know everything, but I'll take what I can get. Also, it might be better for you if you have someone to talk to, and I'd like to be that someone. These past months, although I didn't write, I wanted to. I thought about you every day.

—Love, Violet

Dear Christian:

Another year, another harvest. It was good, but the yield was low, as usual. Papa still wanders through the vineyard, talking to Mama. I tried doing that too, but she never answers. Not the way she seems to for Papa. The vines sway a little, the leaves rustle, but no one speaks. Not really.

I was too young when she died to remember too much about her. I guess that's why she doesn't have anything to say to me. She doesn't know me any better than I know her. Maybe dead people can only communicate with one living person, and that would of course be Papa.

You've stayed quiet. I guess I shouldn't be surprised. Apparently you don't want to speak to me either. I hope everything's okay.

—Violet

Dear Christian:

A boy asked me to a movie. I said no. I only want to go to the movies with you.

At school we're learning to dance in physical education. I have to dance with other boys, even though I don't want to. I pretend they're you.

More than two years have passed. Should I keep pretending?

—Love, Violet

Dear Christian:

It's been a long time since I last wrote, and I'm sorry. Each time I started a letter it sounded dumb, so I tore it up and started again. The next one sounded even dumber. So I decided to just write the first thing that came to me this morning, and naturally it's weird.

You know how a vine leaf comes out? How it's all rolled up when it's small, and as it grows it gradually unfurls? Don't laugh, but I'm feeling that way about myself.

Papa says I'm growing up too fast. When the boys look at me now, they almost never look into my eyes. I hate it and like it all at the same time. I guess mostly I hate it. I don't want to grow up. And then, sometimes, I want to grow all the way up, and fast.

There I go. Another dumb letter. But this time I'm not tearing it up.

Not much else is happening here. Claire's dentist husband is so much like Claire—he's a boy version of Claire—that no one

wants to visit their house for dinner. The occasion is so perfect, the experience so painfully boring, everyone wants to gag. Even Papa excuses himself as early as possible, and says he has to get back to his duties. Funny how much a dinner invitation can increase his workload.

Gabi is still an *au pair*, still with the same family. She's involved with the oldest son of the family, and the parents don't know. I don't want to be a fly on the wall when that bomb goes off. He plays the cello. Badly. His parents support him because they think he'll be a great cello player someday. He won't. I don't know how someone can be a great cello player when their music makes our ears hurt. But from his perspective, it means he doesn't have to get a job. In fact, he doesn't even have to practice the cello.

Papa is slowing down. Uncle August, with all his roustabout employees, offers no help. (I got the word "roustabout" from a thesaurus. Describes them pretty well, doesn't it?)

Papa and I are running the winery now by ourselves, except for harvest time. Papa works sixteen hours a day, and I help out after school. And like I said, he's slowing down. Some things aren't getting done, especially things that need fixing, things that can always wait another day.

Anyway, I've kept you long enough. I hope I didn't freak you out at the beginning of the letter. If you ever want to write to someone, I hope you choose me.

—Love, Violet

Violet:

I have a bed and a toilet.

A few weeks ago someone near me muttered something to a guard, who thought it was me who muttered it. I spent three days

in solitary confinement, which is a room with cardboard boxes as furniture, and no windows or running water.

Technically it's illegal to treat prisoners that way, but when the inspectors come, the prisoners are removed, and all the inspectors see is a storage space filled with cardboard boxes. The odor of shit is removed with aerosols.

—*Christian*

Dear Christian:

You wrote! I was so excited opening the envelope that I accidentally tore your letter. (Don't worry, I taped it back together.)

I'm so sorry that confinement thing happened to you, but the experience is over, right? You can put it behind you, right?

Enclosed is a picture taken of me yesterday. Please ignore the sleepy-eyed look. Claire snapped the shot just as I was blinking, and although I wanted her to take more, she stormed away importantly, like she always does, saying she had no time for "frivolities." You know Claire.

I hope I always have time for frivolities. She says hi, by the way. So does Gabi. Papa only grunts when I mention your name, but I know he cares and just doesn't want to show it.

What else? Let's see, the priest was over for dinner again, and had lots of juicy gossip to share. "That Waldorf girl" is pregnant *again*. It seems she can't hold an aspirin between her knees for long. At least that's how the priest sees it. Last year's vintage at Edelmann's turned brown again, same as every year. Papa says too much oxygen. You'd think they'd learn. Maybe they're trying to make vinegar—and failing even at that.

While I'm at it, Mrs. Stein came by to ask if you'd been released yet. Apparently something you carried to the attic for her needs to be carried back down again. So there's a job waiting for

you when you return. I hope it's not too heavy, whatever it is.

We're halfway there.

—*Love, Violet*

Dear Violet:

Thanks for the picture. You are becoming very beautiful.

—*Christian*

Dear Christian:

I got shivers all over when you called me beautiful. I know you're exaggerating, or maybe outright lying, but still, it felt good to hear.

I've enclosed more pictures. Gabi took them this time. She was more patient than Claire. I hope you like them.

I love you.

—*Love, Violet*

Violet:

Fall in love with someone else, not me. Maybe it's best you stop writing.

—*Christian*

Dear Christian:

I have a boyfriend. I guess that's why I haven't written in so long. First, I didn't know how to tell you. Second, I didn't think you'd care.

His name is Nick. I met him when I went out with some friends. I got tipsy on Long Island Iced Tea, which doesn't taste like an alcoholic beverage at all, but rather like iced tea. Okay, I got more than tipsy, I got drunk.

Nick kept looking at me from across the room. Somehow we got talking, and he's the one who cut me off. I argued I had complete control of my faculties, and demanded another drink. Then I lost my balance and crashed to the floor. He took me home.

Papa was furious, even more at him than at me, but calmed down later when he got the story straight.

So I got a boyfriend. Was I right to do so? Do you care?

—*Violet*

Dear Violet:

They have a nice library here. I spend most of my time in it, reading philosophy (go figure) and literature. One of my fellow inmates is a college graduate. He's been talking to me about going back to school. Although I just shake my head, I like listening to what he says.

—*Christian*

P.S. Nick sounds like a gentleman. In case you haven't figured it out yet, they're rare.

Dear Christian:

There's no boyfriend. I mean, there was, sort of, but it didn't last long. I told Nick I already had a boyfriend, and that he had to move on. Nothing happened between us, I swear. I think about you all the time.

I know it's been years, and I'm sorry if you don't want to hear it, but it's true. I love you, I've always loved you, I'll always love you.

—*Love, Violet*

P.S. Enclosed is a very recent picture. Do you recognize me?

Dear Violet:

I've been thinking a lot about choice. The word is probably the most powerful in the English language, or any language. Maybe the verb form, *choose*, would be a better choice (ha!), because it's active rather than passive, and because it serves as a command. And because it sums up life in one simple yet powerful word.

Life consists of choices and consequences. Not all consequences are predictable, but almost all choices are ours to make. Having said that, I didn't choose to live in a cage. Or rather, I did choose it, but not consciously, which means, not with consequences in mind.

If you want to sleep in a microscopic room with a toilet and a snoring roommate, you can put up with it, especially knowing you're allowed to leave any time. But if it's not a choice, or not a conscious one, you're trapped in that room. And the walls, identical in either case, are indifferent to the choices you've made, and all the thicker, more rigid, and less penetrable.

We erect walls all the time. Mine happen to be tangible. I can't pass through them, I can't see through them, they're not only *part* of my world, they *are* my world.

I never lay eyes on vines, but when they let us outside, I can see trees. I think a lot about things that grow in the ground. They're trapped, like me, because they can't go anywhere. But unlike me they're free.

It feels like a paradox. I can move about, I can even dance. But I'm a prisoner. I think about trees I've seen growing in confined spaces, for example inside shopping malls, and I wonder if they feel the same way I do. The difference, of course, is they didn't choose their incarceration, or any action that had incarceration as a possible consequence.

Would I be happy here if this were the only life I knew? If I didn't know you?

So now I'm going to make a choice, and consciously, which is to say, I'm prepared for the consequences. I choose to tell you I love you too.

—*Love, Christian*

Dear Christian:

When you get out, you'll be 24 and I'll be 18. Papa won't have anything to say about us being together. Not that he probably would, anyway. He's gotten slower. But still.

I think a lot about what he says about happiness. That it doesn't exist, except in contrast to sorrow. On one hand he's right: only a crazy person could be happy all the time. But I think there's a state of mind such that one can accept the occasional sorrow, the ups and downs, and still be happy.

Papa, as you know, says it comes from having a passion. If you love the rose, you don't notice the thorns. I sort of disagree. You do notice the thorns, and they hurt, but you accept the rose for what it is. You acknowledge that a beautiful thing can droop here and there. You accept the rose, with its thorns, because you want to enjoy its petals. I guess what I'm trying to say is, I love you despite some choices you've made. And I'll bring Papa around.

Gabi and I had a long talk. Don't get mad. She says you're too hard on yourself. That you have a brilliant mind and don't acknowledge it, don't trust it. Speaking for myself, I don't think love is something you can evaluate by placing some of a person's traits in one column and others in another. It's the total package or nothing. All I know is that I always felt electrified in your presence.

That's my criterion, if anyone should ask. Do you feel electrified in their presence?—if not, keep looking, you haven't found the love of your life, or even a candidate for the position. Or a date to the prom, as far as I'm concerned.

Now look, I've gotten all metaphysical, when what I want to be is mushy and emotional. I love you, I love only you, I'm electrified in your presence, I'm electrified by a mere envelope with your name in the return address. I can't wait until you get out.

Here's another picture of me. I hope you stare at it.

—*Love, Violet*

Dear Violet:

Love is one of those things you can't choose. And it's one of the reasons we're here. Having said that, it was selfish of me to tell you I love you.

Things aren't going well for me.

—*Christian*

Dear Christian:

Remember when Papa talked to you about peace of mind? You may not remember me being around, but I tagged along everywhere you and he went and listened to everything. He said happiness is nothing more than peace of mind. That peace of mind is nothing more than accepting things the way they are. That accepting things the way they are is nothing more than a choice one makes.

There's that word you like so much: choice.

Happiness is acceptance. Love is acceptance. Life is acceptance.

At the time I thought Papa was being rather condescending, although I didn't yet have the vocabulary to express myself. Now

I wonder: maybe you should listen to him. Maybe we both should listen to him.

I ran into Mr. Tullius downtown. He asked about Papa, and when I was done sighing and rolling my eyes he said, “Your father, now there’s a considerable man.”

—*Love, Violet*

Dear Christian:

I didn’t hear back from you after my last letter. I hope everything’s okay.

Papa’s getting slower, and the competition from Uncle August is getting stiffer. We keep lowering our prices, yet we continue to be undercut. It’s becoming clear that August’s plan is to force us out of business. He wants the vineyard. He wants all of it.

We’re falling behind in our work. I don’t know what to do. We can’t afford to hire anyone.

I wish you were here. If you were here, everything would be okay.

Everything.

Two more years is too long to wait.

—*Love, Violet*

Dear Christian:

I’m counting the days until you get out. I’m waiting for you. Each second spent waiting seems longer than the last. Each day stretches to an eternity.

If every thought of you were a ray of light, you’d never know darkness again.

One more year. Just one more year. It’s practically tomorrow.

—*Love, Violet*

Dear Christian:

Papa had a heart attack. It took the ambulance forever to arrive. As you know, the nearest hospital is thirty minutes away. *If* the roads aren't jammed. *If* the river isn't flooding.

I rode with him in the ambulance. His eyes were open and he stared listlessly at the roof of the vehicle. It looked to me like he'd given up. But the doctors told me later he'd be okay.

He was in the cardiac ICU for a week. I should have written to you right away, but I was completely focused on him. Sorry to be selfish, but he's all I have at this time.

He's home now, walking with a cane, when he walks at all. My picture of Papa doesn't include a cane, so I'm getting used to a new reality. He's always been so strong and confident, like a tree. His gait, his stride, whatever you call it, never had issues with balance.

Well, now it does. He leans on a stick and hobbles. Now would be the perfect time for Uncle August to offer help. He has so many employees, he can't keep track of them all. Besides, at any given time half of them are in the Gasthaus, pouring beer down their throats and picking fights. He probably celebrated when he heard the news.

You know what bothers me most of all this? Papa spends almost all of his waking hours in the vineyard. But not working; he's talking to Mama. I'm worried about him. He always imagined Mama's presence, then he hoped for it, then he yearned for it. Now I think he actually believes in it.

It's just me and him to run the winery. Claire and Gabi are busy. That's only fair, they have lives too. But without Papa pulling his weight I don't know how I can make it. Even full time. (If

you and I had been communicating regularly I'd have told you I graduated from high school. Yippee.)

Whenever I finish a task, two more pop up. I'm falling further behind every day.

The vines are pruned. I don't know how I'm going to get all the racking done. The wine will have to suffer. And the house is an embarrassing mess. We don't have guests over anymore.

You've known all along I want you to come home when you're released. But that was always because I love you and want to be with you. None of which has changed, but—it makes me weep to write this—now I need you, Christian, when you get out next month. I not only love you, and want you, I absolutely need you too. I need you to come home. Here is where you belong.

Christian, please come home. If you don't, please at least write and tell me where you go.

No, scratch that. I don't want to grant you options. I don't want to grant you a choice. Just come home.

—*Love, Violet*

Chapter Twenty

Christian remembered the road. He remembered the first time he traveled it, a guard from The Corners taking him to his new home as though transferring him to another detention facility. He remembered how narrow the road was, and wondering what the driver would do if a car came from the other direction.

This time he arrived in a taxi, but the road was still the road. Grapevines colonized the near terrain and the far horizon. Had they been able, they would have climbed the sky. Only now everything seemed smaller. The stone wall bordering the high side of the road, to buttress the steep hillside vineyard, was lower than Christian remembered. He could step over it easily, whereas somehow the first time he saw it he found it formidable.

The Rotenbach was reduced to a trickle. It was dry season and the banks were bare on both sides. Christian knew nothing would grow on those banks, or remain long if they tried, because the river would rise during the wet season and wash away every stubborn, clinging sapling and sprout, and disinfect its floodplain.

It was dry season, but the sky spoke of a desire to rain.

As the taxi wound toward the bridge, the sun glared off the surface of the river. The current flickered and shimmered, as though the two, water and light, had evolved convergently, the purpose of their symbiotic relationship merely to prove nature knew, indeed, how to smile.

The bridge was the same, only older, only smaller. The planks rattled and screeched their vain objection to the taxi's weight, to the indentured servitude of carrying passengers high and dry in their noxious vehicles above the murmuring waters beneath.

Delheim's church loomed into view. Half-timbered houses followed, and as the taxi pulled into town, window boxes overflowing with flowers stood out against the bare stones and weathered beams like clustering butterflies. Some things were, in fact, as big as Christian remembered them.

On a familiar cobblestone street, before a familiar French eclectic mansion, the taxi driver let Christian out, then did a U-turn and sputtered away. Christian was alone in the silence of a sleepy town at midday.

The birds honored the occasion with the presence of mind to sing their songs. The vines in the yard were more gnarled than Christian remembered, and more crotchety in their awkward poses.

The house was in disrepair. One shutter hung loose, tilted at an angle. Several roof shingles were missing, probably blown off in the storm. The old paint had begun to bubble and flake.

A breeze rose from the valley. He looked across the river to the vineyards on the other side. Leaves trembled and blushed green under an indulgent sun. Apparently someone remembered him.

Immanuel almost didn't. When he answered the door in response to Christian's ring, he squinted at the figure before him. Then his eyes widened in surprise.

"We weren't expecting you until Monday."

"A clerical error got me out early."

Immanuel leaned on a cane. His formerly dark brown eyes were bloodshot and watery.

"So you came back," he said.

"Only to see Violet," Christian answered. "And to say hello to you," he added quickly.

"Well, don't stand there in the wild, come inside."

Christian followed him into the house, then into the vat room. He'd been hosing down the inside of a fiberglass vat resting on its side. Now he picked up the hose again, turned on the water, and continued.

"Did you get rehabilitated? Or do you need more time in the zoo."

"Is Violet home?"

"Haven't seen her all morning. Was she expecting you?"

"No. Like you, not until Monday."

"Well, you can't expect people to sit around and wait for you on the off chance there might be a clerical error. She's probably out in the vines. She spends more and more of her time out there with her."

"With ... her?"

"Her mother. I'm sure she'd want me to send you out, if you happened to show up early, if there happened to be a clerical error." Immanuel returned to his work.

"Why didn't you replace me?" Christian asked.

"How do you know I didn't?"

Christian looked pointedly at the mess, at the dirty floor.

“There’s less work to do, I guess,” Immanuel answered. “We don’t need the help anymore.”

Christian turned to leave.

Immanuel asked, “Do you have any inclination to stay?”

“Do you want me to?”

“Is it relevant? Go on, Violet will want to know you’re here. And hurry, it’s about to rain.”

Christian walked toward the river, passing the garden plots, the shaded cemetery, the myriad flowers in their window boxes. He watched as the vineyard across the river loomed before him, rising higher as he drew nearer, until it consumed his view and periphery. It was, after all, the whole world to the people who lived below it.

He crossed the bridge and wandered into the vines, then turned uphill and climbed the steep slate incline. The wind picked up. He paused at each row, looking down its length, until he spied a figure a few hundred yards in, sitting among the vines.

The figure saw him and rose to her feet.

That can’t be her, Christian thought. She’s way too tall.

As he got closer he noticed her hair was shorter.

That can’t be her.

He stopped before her and looked into her eyes.

Oh my god it’s her.

He’d always thought of her as cute, as adorable, and had witnessed the transformation via pictures she sent him in prison. But he wasn’t prepared for this. He wasn’t prepared to meet the embodiment of all he found innocent and lovely.

“I grew up,” Violet said.

“Yes, you did.”

A young lady instead of a little girl. Except he could still see the little girl in her face, in her smile. It was like meeting someone for the first time, someone he'd known all his life.

She squirmed. "I don't know how I'm supposed to behave around you."

"Just be yourself."

She looked at his wringing hands. "You too," she said. "Be who you've always been." She smiled. The smile was still shy, only now it wasn't lopsided, and there was no gap in her front teeth. Her hair wasn't tousled and disorderly. She wasn't a pipsqueak anymore.

Christian had never believed in soul mates. The Earth was populated with people, too many people, and some got along better than others. Some got along so well, they believed they were made for each other. But it was just fantasy, just idealistic thinking.

Looking into Violet's eyes, he verified love wasn't governed by an external source. Soul mates weren't chosen by some divine or mystical plan. They existed nonetheless. They belonged together because they chose to be together, and they'd earned the relationship through shared experiences, shared perspectives.

To make me happy, you only need enter the room. What is love if not that? *If every thought of you were a ray of light, you'd never know darkness again.* What more proof of love does anyone need?

"You came," she said. "I knew you would."

"Your father says you're out here visiting your mother."

She looked around sheepishly. "Just an excuse, really."

"An excuse for what?"

"To be alone with you when you returned. On the off chance you might arrive early, you might find a way."

Christian took Violet in his arms and kissed her. Among the fertile grapes, anchored to a fertile Earth, he kissed her.

She looked up at him. It started to rain.

He kissed her again. *A girl whose eyes are alight with creation's first fire holds me fiercely in the cold pouring rain.*

She relaxed in his arms. Tears mixed with rain and ran down her cheeks. The long wait was over.

Chapter Twenty-One

When Christian woke the following morning he didn't know where he was, yet his surroundings were oddly familiar. The desk in the corner, the Schrank taking up an entire wall.

Delheim.

The light of day prompted him to jump out of bed. In San Quentin he could have been punished for remaining in bed so long. But he wasn't in San Quentin any longer.

Delheim.

He threw on some clothes and found Immanuel puttering in the kitchen.

"Sleep well?" Immanuel asked.

"Too well. What time is it?"

Immanuel looked at his watch. "Ten."

"Good god, I haven't slept this much in eight years. Is Violet up yet?"

"And already at work in the vineyard. Can I interest you in some breakfast?"

"Thanks, I'll save my appetite for lunch."

He tracked Violet down, high on the far bank, where the incline was steepest. She wore gloves and wielded a pair of pruning shears.

"I've been wondering when you'd show up, sleepy head. Here," she handed him gloves and shears, "make yourself useful."

They worked in adjacent rows, moving from high to low, cliff to riverbank, then back up again, each time shifting to the next pair of rows. The vines were mature. Christian guessed upwards of twenty years old.

He remembered: First, cut away last year's canes. Leave two healthy ones, as close to the trunk as possible. Prune them back ten buds. Stretch them out along the trellis wire. *He remembered.*

Two canes per trunk, stretched in opposite directions, clamped to a wire. Cane pruning, as opposed to spur pruning. At the end, a vine holds its skinny arms up and out, like horrid little scarecrows.

A shy silence occupied the space between him and Violet. They could hear each other's shears snapping. The wind picked up, the vines shuddered. Violet looked off to the distance and smiled.

Christian asked, "Do you believe it now? About your mother?"

"I suppose I do."

"It's comforting, isn't it?"

"I suppose it is, but that's not what makes it true."

"What makes it true?"

"It's one of the odd things I learned while you were away. What's true for one person isn't necessarily true for another."

"You know me well enough to know—"

"That you disagree. Yes, I do. You believe in absolutes. It's how you cope. How I cope is by viewing things as relative. Truth is relative to one's experience. As long as our experiences differ, our version of the truth can also."

“So you believe your mother still exists, in some conscious form.”

“I don’t know if it’s conscious. I just know no one ever leaves, not entirely. They return to nature, where you can visit them anytime. Anywhere in nature. That’s my truth. That’s how I cope.”

They worked some more. Amputated canes littered the ground.

“How do you like being back in your old room?” Violet asked.

“It’s exactly how I left it. Why has no one occupied it since? Why haven’t you hired anyone?”

“What did my father tell you?”

“That there’s less work.”

She laughed. “There’s more work, more than ever. But money is tight. That’s what Papa doesn’t want to admit, at least not to you. He can’t afford the help.”

“Which means he can’t even afford me.”

After a pause Violet said, “I help with the labor now. I work in the fields. Because he can’t do it all himself, not anymore.”

“August’s family still doesn’t offer any help?”

Violet looked at him and raised an eyebrow.

They broke for lunch. Violet had brought a blanket and food enough for the two of them. They had a picnic on the riverbank.

She shared what little she knew of August’s family. The grandmother, Angelika, Immanuel’s mother, was still alive and kicking. Immanuel rarely saw her. He rarely went to the Gasthaus anymore either, because he didn’t want anymore run-ins with August’s employees.

At mention of the latter, Violet looked at Christian accusingly. He suppressed a smile and looked away.

Violet got him up to date on Claire and Gabi. Claire was still married to the dentist. No matter how boring her life was, no matter how stark raving mad she became, she'd remain married to him. Because the alternative—divorce and a genuinely happy life—was repugnant to her. Status was everything.

Gabi was still with her cello-playing boyfriend. He was one of two people in the world who thought he could play the cello. The other was his mother.

"You'll get the rest of the gossip when the priest comes to dinner."

Christian looked down, selected a blade of grass, and plucked it. "If I stay that long," he said.

Violet neither moved nor spoke. Then she said, "Give the winery a shot."

"I gave it a shot once."

"No you didn't."

They locked eyes. Christian was the first to turn away.

"You gave it half a shot," Violet said. "Then you returned to your old lifestyle. Stay and get it right this time. What we're doing here is as good a way to make a living, as good a way to spend one's life, as any other. And who knows? Maybe you'll find the peace of mind that's always eluded you."

"You've been listening to your father too much."

"No," she said, "you haven't been listening enough."

Chapter Twenty-Two

Christian lay in bed, trying to read a novel. He kept starting the same paragraph over and over, losing concentration halfway through and starting again.

The window was open, and sounds of night spilled into the room. Crickets competing for mates. He was reminded of the rural legend that you can gauge the outdoor temperature by counting cricket chirps. The night was warm, the air was still, and Christian felt agitated in a way he couldn't explain—or wouldn't admit.

He was sore all over from pruning. He hadn't let on to Violet. It had been years since he'd performed that kind of labor, and he didn't want her to think he had gone soft. He predicted that tomorrow he'd be stiff and would struggle to conceal his suffering.

He gave up reading, set the book on the nightstand, and turned out the light.

The door creaked open.

Could be the house cat, Christian thought. Immanuel had gotten one to replace the mouse traps, and it only came out at night. But there was an unmistakable figure in the doorway. He couldn't risk blundering, so he said, "Immanuel?"

But the figure was shorter than Immanuel, and didn't answer. That's when he knew. The door closed again and the figure approached.

Violet was in her nightgown. She sat down at the edge of the bed. As she leaned toward Christian the starlight captured her soft features and adoring eyes.

Christian instinctively held back, but Violet reached for him.

"I'm not a little girl anymore," she said.

She shed her clothes as he watched. He could still hear the crickets, but they were far away. An owl called. What seemed like an hour later, another answered. Then there was nothing but Violet. Her pliable flesh. The wetness of her lips. The long warmth of her legs pressing against his. The gentle lap of hair brushing his shoulders.

His love for Violet felt like a sin, a violation of virtue. Yet a current flowed between them. No, that wasn't it. That's crass. You call that poetry? Anyone could come up with that. But it *was* a kind of electricity, a fusion, a fundamental attraction the physicists missed, wherein every particle of his was attracted to every one of hers. Harmony wasn't the right word for it. There was no word for it.

Listen to your body, Christian thought. It's speaking to you. Its nerve endings are telling you, you're not only alive, you're loved. He felt the mattress beneath his back. Its firmness, its stability, its indifferent stillness. In sharp contrast to the girl—no, woman—on top of him, pressing her body against his. Her hair heavy, dense, lustrous, lapping against his skin like ripples of velvet air. She touched him with her fingertips, her wet lips, her tongue. Moving, squirming in her own pleasure, a pleasure derived from bringing pleasure to him.

You want this, you say. I want it too, I say. Rules be damned, you say. Rules have gotten me in trouble, I say. Some rules are meant to be broken, you say. That what I say about all rules, I say. So there you are, you say. But your father, I say. Leave him to me, you say.

It was ancient, this desire, as ancient as the species, as ancient as life on Earth. It glowed in their eyes, a signal, a message, from eons back. It was audible in their voices, in their accelerated breathing, the guttural sounds they made that were no different from those other organisms had made over the expanse of geological time. Those other voices were silent. Theirs were active. Theirs filled the aural ether, and would join the others in the discordant clamor echoing back to the blush of creation. Even the trembling they experienced would marry the subtle remnants of past trembling, past sighing, past ache, past yearning.

The smell of the forest, of the sea, of seaweed, of clams in the sand, of apples, of pine needles, of lavender.

Distract me from this world. Make me dizzy. Turn me into a blithering idiot. Feed me fruit from the tree. Lay down in the grass with me. Become the spring. With you it's always the vernal equinox. The scent of flowers blooming. Of fresh mown grass. In the fall we'll curl up around a fire and gaze at each other, the fire flickering in our eyes.

When you move, I hear the sound of ocean waves against the shore. When you speak, I hear the songs of cool spring nights. When your mouth touches mine, I feel the warm breath of nature, the caress of countless wistful extinctions, the ache of every dead and dying poet.

It was all in fact a dream. Or at least would feel like one afterwards. The woman was no longer a child, yet he still saw the child in her, still wanted to treat her delicately. She wanted to be

taken. She dug her nails into his back and pulled him hard against her. Her hair spread across the pillow. Now her lips merely grazed his, the subtle contact enough to channel her hunger, to communicate her consent, her willingness, and her greed.

And the biding thought that they were doing something wrong. That this was Violet. That she was Immanuel's youngest daughter, sent currents of doubt and hesitation through him. But again, this was Violet. And he wanted to press her so close that she'd fuse to him. He felt her thighs sliding against his. He felt them open. And all he needed was instinct. He'd been practicing for billions of years.

Nature speaks in the language of bees, in the dialect of rustling leaves, in the dreamy mood of flowing water.

He and Violet separated from the world and entered a cocoon. There was still a macrocosm out there somewhere, a foggy realm of minor importance. They'd return to it someday. It was hushed at the moment, waiting with all the patience of the cosmos for them to fulfill their timeless and immortal mission. And if you shot an arrow in any direction, and nothing ever got in its way, it would return, having traversed the non-Euclidean universe, and pierce you in the heart.

Nothing existed but her. Her face, her eyes, the exquisite, tenuous, and ethereal touch of her lips, her hips. Nothing else. Maybe the bed. But nothing supporting it. And no passage of time, either. Time had stopped, the seasons had paused, winter wasn't coming, might never come again. Grapevines suspended in place, as though waiting at attention. And that smell was the memory of flowers blooming, and mown grass accumulating in scattered piles, and smoke rising from burning leaves, and the wonderful moistness you sensed whenever a thunderstorm approached. And that sound was nothing more than the dissonant

buzz of the aural ether, all the moans and cries and sighs and laughter from countless communal voices.

What was it Plato said about soulmates? As long as they were apart, they'd spend an eternity longing for each other. Relationships are tapestries, woven of colorful threads in intricate patterns, with hopelessly frayed ends.

Your hands, your feet, your hair, my breath growing more rapid, my heart beating dangerously loud, the perspiration on my forehead, all caused by you, by the feel of your skin, the touch of your fingers, your mere presence, the Earth Goddess manifested, and now all boundaries dissolve away, and you and I are the only two beings on the planet, the one single solitary entity in the universe.

I was, as ever should be, I am, as could I would be, I will, and never won't be, deeply in love with you.

It isn't that the rest of the universe goes away. It's not that, after all. It's that all matter and energy combine. We are, all of us, joined in a single lumpy gob, an aggregate of all stars and planets and living beings. The wind that pushes down on the prairies, the blossoms that poke their way up, the tapestry the two embroider. Climaxes are replays of the cosmic creation, births a facsimile of spring. And the singing you hear, it's the birds. They're back. The universe has reconstituted itself, the waters are flowing again. The dragonflies buzz the surface of the streams, terrible and beautiful at the same time. The crickets rebound, pick up right where they left off.

The scent of thunder, the melody of starlight, the vision of sweetness, the taste of fire, the touch of smoke. Rapt as a sunflower, you trace the ecliptic. Stoic as a dandelion, you bend to the wind.

To feel your skin against mine is all it takes to feel alive. To feel your fingers touch me is all it takes to believe the universe has design, and therefore a designer. To know you exist is enough to make me want to continue existing. To be in your presence is enough to make me want to sing. I'll sing to you, and my voice will carry over the din, over the night, over the space between us, no matter how great.

Fireflies yearn to be stars in the sky, and the stars shine solely for creatures of the night.

God's workbench. God's machine shop. A furnace, a crucible. The sighs, and again the breeze, the burning leaves, the scent of an approaching storm, the spill and drip of pigments in a sunset, the whispering quiet, the settling of the quilt of night.

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Christian held Violet in his arms. She rested her head on his chest. Owls hooted outside the window. He remembered the owls. They were there before.

She asked, "How do you feel?"

He smiled. The smile was genuine. He couldn't remember the last time that happened.

He said, "Right. I feel right."

"Me too," she said. "I feel right too." She rubbed his chest. "You're not sore all over? From pruning?"

"Oh, that. Nah, what we did today was child's play."

"Good to hear. We'll get twice as much done tomorrow."

"Well, let's not get hysterical."

She touched his lips with her fingertips. He pulled her tighter and they kissed gently.

"You know," she said, "the last time I slept in this room with you, I was on the floor."

“Don’t remind me. The last time you slept in this room with me, I was arrested the next morning.”

Later in the night Violet climbed back on top of Christian, and they began again. She whispered in his ear:

“What do you think about staying and being a winemaker now?”

Chapter Twenty-Three

Christian stepped out of the house at six o'clock the next morning and noticed that fence railings had fallen to the ground. Some of the posts jutted up at odd angles, like they'd sprouted from the nettles and refused to conform. He thought, this is as good a place as any to start.

He went to work restoring the winery. The weeds were out of control. The soil was tired and in need of fertilizer. A month passed, during which he checked off task after task.

Mostly what he did was clean. Immanuel hadn't changed as a taskmaster, even if he'd had no one to task. Fix it and clean it, fix it better and clean it again.

At the end of each day he was worn out. He crawled into bed with Violet and they made love. Immanuel knew the two were sleeping together. He said nothing. He sat at the breakfast table in silence and avoided eye contact with Christian.

He'll come around, Christian thought. Fathers have to get used to the idea of their daughters growing up and ... doing things.

For fertilizer, Immanuel used a combination of compost and manure. Christian filled wheelbarrows and carted them up the rows, dispensing the natural nutrients with a shovel. Until then he'd been under the impression "shoveling shit" was just an ex-

pression. At least, he was pleased to learn, Immanuel didn't use pesticides.

When wine stock ran low, it was time to fill more bottles, using their four-bottle filling machine. Corking and labeling was still done by hand. Immanuel's corking device was an ancient wooden frame with a crank. It rested on the floor, and Christian had to insert one bottle, and one water-soaked cork, at a time. By pressing the crank down like a tire jack, the device forced the cork into the neck of the bottle.

Labeling was even less fun, and thus there were always unlabeled bottles sitting around waiting for someone to get off his ass and label them. It was Immanuel's favorite threat: "If you don't want to sweep the floor, you can always label bottles." "If you don't want to spread manure, you can always label bottles." Bottle labeling—swiping the backs of labels with glue and positioning them to the cylindrical glass—was tedious, messy, smelly work.

Shingles were missing from the roof of the house. Christian replaced them. The piano was out of tune. After waiting until he was sure Immanuel wouldn't hire someone to do it, Christian tuned it himself.

Wash behind the ears, and practice your scales.

The family priest invited himself to lunch. He squinted when he saw Christian, as though he recognized him but couldn't place him in his gossip archives.

"Mrs. Becker is complaining about slugs in her garden. I told her to set out a bowl of homebrew to capture them, and she looked at me in surprise. Either she didn't know slugs like beer, or she didn't know I knew she was brewing the stuff in her basement..."

“The new Waldorf baby is so chubby, one of these days it’s going to roll down the hill. The parents shouldn’t feed it so much...”

“Mr. Edelmann claims to have sold his entire stock of wine. Given how it tasted, I choose to believe he poured it down the drain...”

“Mrs. Grunewald has gotten it into her head to learn Norwegian...”

“Mr. and Mrs. Eckes are getting a divorce. Turns out wife swapping isn’t for the timid...”

The priest suddenly remembered where he’d seen Christian before. “You’re the jailbird,” he said.

“It’s one of the names I go by.”

“Ah. I understand prisoners are given opportunities to straighten out their lives and turn to God. Is that true?”

“It’s true,” Christian admitted. “We’re given opportunities to straighten out, and we’re given opportunities to turn to a god.”

“The way you say that makes me wonder whether you took advantage of the opportunities.”

“To straighten out, yes. I prefer never to see the inside of a prison again.”

“And turning to God?”

“If the day ever comes that I believe in your god, I’ll turn to him.”

“But my dear boy, there’s evidence of Him everywhere.”

“Where?”

“You only need look. At all the beauty in the world. At all the mystery.”

Christian nodded. “And if I point to depressions in the yard and tell you they’re elephant footprints, will you believe we keep invisible ones as pets?”

“A man with a record such as yours should atone as soon as possible, and spare himself time in an unpleasant place.”

“I just came from an unpleasant place. There was more honor among those inside than in many of the people keeping us there.”

The priest threw his hands in the air. “Very well! It has been a delightful lunch.” He nodded to Immanuel. “Thank you, sir.”

After the priest had gone, Christian apologized to Immanuel for spoiling lunch.

“On the contrary,” Immanuel said. “It’s long past time someone put that asshole in his place.”

Christian returned to work. He carried cases of wine from the warehouse to waiting customers. He weeded Mrs. Stein’s garden. He fixed. He cleaned. His love for Violet grew.

So did his restlessness.

Chapter Twenty-Four

A year passed. The buds opened once again, on vines naked and gnarled. The grass between them became lush and green and speckled with dandelions. The vineyard was quiet and patient, waiting for instructions from the sun.

The wire fence marking the property line leaned with age and apathy. Little youth or vitality remained in the inanimate objects serving the winery. Canes stretched to their maximum along the trellises, preparing again to bear fruit. Last year's tendrils clung to the canes in a futile attempt at relevance.

In contrast, birds chattered, insects buzzed, owls called near and far. The hills were checkered with rectangular patches of cultivation, variegated greens and browns, the rows insisting on repeating their texture monotonously in the landscape.

Christian learned the finer points of winemaking. Aging the wine. The pros and cons of oaking. Planting, agronomy, the influence of soil on flavor. Limiting yields. Oxidation, pH, cold stabilization, malolactic fermentation. "There is no such thing as a truly dry wine." The fancy and largely meaningless terms to describe bouquet. Cleanliness, cleanliness, cleanliness.

Immanuel had grown more generous with his knowledge, perhaps because he did less work after the heart attack. Christian guessed he'd embraced his own mortality and realized he needed

to pass the knowledge along or take it to his grave. His productivity diminished month-by-month until it flattened and he surrendered his tired frame to a lounge chair. Christian worked harder.

Immanuel had always been obsessed with the temperature of the must in his vats. "Eighteen degrees," he muttered repeatedly. "As close to eighteen degrees as possible, without going over. The thermometer is the winemaker's most important tool." Soon Christian, too, was obsessed with temperature, and constantly checked the thermometers affixed to the sides of the vats.

He and Violet raised a fresh crop, and the two became inseparable. In bed they stared into each other's eyes until the light became too dim to make out details. They continued to stare, seeking each other in the settling darkness, finding remnant glints, trusting the other's presence in the opaque space between them, touching lips in the most tentative of kisses.

The weather grew warm and the grapes matured on their vines. Another crop was harvested, another vintage was created. Pickers invaded the vineyard, fewer in number because funds were low. Calls of "Eimer!" drifted across the rows, and workers joked with one another about filling their buckets with rocks.

Christian could sometimes see August Dessoir across the way, tending his own vineyard. Sometimes August looked up and regarded Christian with what looked like curiosity. Maybe bewilderment better described it. Then, without greeting or acknowledgement, they each returned to their work.

Christian avoided contact with the townspeople. He conducted his errands with eyes lowered, as though avoiding dog poop on the sidewalk. They stared at him. They'd never known what to make of him; of that, he'd always been aware. But there was no point revealing his true self. He wasn't just from another

town, he was from another world. And as long as they hadn't seen what he'd seen, they'd never understand his perspective or motives.

He would never be one of them. He would never care enough about the weather or the price of fertilizer or a hundred other details about which their lives revolved.

Sometimes he bought alcohol at Mr. Winkler's little grocery store. Winkler tried to make conversation, but Christian would have nothing of it. He accepted his change, said "Good day to you, sir," and left the store.

He felt bad about the way he treated Mr. Winkler and the others. They didn't deserve to be ignored or shunned. He just didn't have anything to say to them.

He felt overworked, but knew he had no right to complain. Immanuel was of no help; he wandered the vineyard, visiting with Aimee. Christian's one solace was Violet. They spoke in whispers from their respective pillows, facing each other, their noses almost touching.

"Shh," Violet said.

"No, you shh," Christian responded.

"No, *you* shh."

Claire and Gabi came home for a visit, and the entire family gathered at the dinner table. For the first ten minutes awkward silence reigned, interrupted only by the clatter of utensils. Claire was now twenty-five, and still wispy, maintaining one's weight being crucial to one's image as the wife of a prominent dentist. Or more accurately self-image. Her hair was still in a bun and her arms were still covered to the wrists. Christian couldn't remember ever having seen her elbows. She sat next to her husband, Nolan, who said nothing, but regularly snuck glances at his watch.

Gabi had moved to Italy to work as an *au pair*. Apparently American girls were a “get.” She was back for a visit, but not for long. Her next destination was Prague.

“It’s so bourgeois here,” she said. “I want to live in the Paris of the East.”

Christian noticed her tattoos had been removed. Her glances at him seemed to say, *You had your chance*.

The subject of happiness came up, as it always did when Gabi was around. She asked Claire point blank whether she was happy, while casting a critical glance at Nolan filling the space next to her.

“Of course I’m happy,” Claire answered. “I *must* be happy. I have everything I want. Except, of course, children.” She turned to look at Nolan, who continued eating as though alone in the room.

“I plan to have children too,” Gabi said. “But I want to figure out who I am first.”

There was stifled laughter at the table.

“I’m serious,” she said. “I don’t care if it sounds funny. I want to figure out who I am and where I belong. These past months out of the country, taking care of someone else’s children, has been a priceless experience. You get a perspective on where you come from and where you’re headed.”

“Interesting thing about that,” Immanuel said, “is that where you belong is something you already know, something you’ve always known. In fact, everyone knows. It’s just so close to *you*, it’s out of focus.”

“All right, where?”

“You’ll see it one day. It will come into focus, and you’ll realize the answer has been in front of you all your life.”

✱

Later in bed, after Violet was asleep, Christian thought about what Immanuel had said. Is this all there is to life? Growing grapes? Letting little bugs eat yeast and pee ethanol? Is the working life any different from the criminal life, from prison life? The walls took different forms, but in either case they were there. If he left, if he sought different walls, where would he go?

The house was falling apart, the winemaking equipment was in disorder. Maybe Gabi was right. He was as unsure of where he belonged as ever before in his life. He even questioned his love for Violet—and immediately admonished himself. But was he confusing love with security? With direction? With nostalgia?

He held Violet so tightly, she woke up.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“Nothing. Go back to sleep.”

But he knew she wouldn’t until he did. So he turned to face away from her. She put her arms around him and held him just as tightly, as though she feared he’d slip away.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Christian hauled cardboard boxes full of slate up the slopes and manually spread their contents among the vines. The work was strenuous, but Immanuel was married to the idea that slate influenced the flavor of the wine.

It was bullshit as far as Christian was concerned. You couldn't taste the slate anymore than you could taste what a pig ate the night before you ate the pig. Immanuel also entertained the notion that suffering built character, so there was no getting out of the chore. Besides, slate improved drainage, preventing the roots of the vines from becoming saturated, and it retained heat from the sun and radiated it back to the vines.

At least that was the conventional wisdom. To Immanuel's way of thinking, distributing a few boxes of slate on his vineyard every year would, over time, keep the Dessoir estate a slate-rich winery. So Christian grudgingly hauled boxes of metamorphic rock, harvested from somewhere else, and dispensed it over relatively bare ground, trying to achieve as much cover as possible. What else was he going to do today? Weed Mrs. Stein's garden?

At the boundary of the vineyard, at the end of a row, he looked up and saw August Dessoir standing before him, with a young man at his side. It was the first time the two had ever come face-to-face.

“My son, Thomas,” August said, by way of introduction.

The three shook hands. August was a reflection of Immanuel, but with inaccuracies. Rather more like an echo of Immanuel’s stout figure, dark brown eyes, short dark hair, now going gray, and ruddy, weathered face. Or a clone. Or a factory reject, a malfunction on the assembly line.

“I hear a lot about you,” August said.

“I’m afraid to ask what you hear.”

“You should be, given that I hear it from the likes of Vance, Sebastian, and Niels.”

“You concern yourself with those apes?”

“They work for me.”

“Right.”

“You kicked the shit out of them.”

“Sorry.”

August’s estate stretched behind him, beginning only a few feet away, across a mere strip of grass. An unplanted boundary line separated the two properties, a line wide enough to ensure neither crop infected the other with its nearness. August’s grapes were Müller-Thurgau, which produced a higher yield than Riesling, and more profit. Also, a mediocre wine.

“I’m willing to overlook your lip,” August said, “because everyone talks about your hard work and attention to detail. Take that slate, for instance. If it were any of my boys, they’d dump the load in the river and go smoke a joint instead. You should hear Mrs. Stein brag about you.”

“What is it you want?”

“Oh, I thought that was obvious. I want you to work for me. I came to offer you a job.”

“Why should I work for you?”

"I'll pay you better, that's the first reason. What do you get paid now?"

"Room and board."

August laughed. "Well, then, I'll pay you a lot better."

"I'll have to think about it."

"Look, son. You don't have to spend your days doing jobs like this."

"Immanuel wants me to."

"He's going down. You know that."

"He's doing fine."

"He's going down, and when he goes, this place," he gestured disdainfully at Immanuel's spread, "will go down with him. As will you."

"That will make you happy, I'm sure. It's true Immanuel is as poor as the winter birds that peck at his vines, but he's a great winemaker."

"Better than me?"

"You know the answer to that. And you can't stand it."

The son, Thomas Dessoir, spoke for the first time. "He should try making a living, like the rest of us, instead of always falling on his sword."

"It's Riesling he falls on his sword for."

"Müller-Thurgau is good wine too."

"True, and if good were all Immanuel set out to achieve, he'd plant it. Now if you'll excuse me, I have rocks to spread."

August and Thomas turned to leave. August said, "Keep the offer in mind. It will always be there."

"So will the rocks."

✱

When Christian returned to the house, he found a man waiting in the lawn, his hands in his pockets. It took him a moment

to recognize Michael Ramirez, his old superintendent at The Corners. Ramirez slouched as though he carried the weight of all the world's delinquent boys on his shoulders.

"It's been almost a decade," Ramirez said.

"Did you miss me?"

"As a matter of fact, I did." He nodded toward the house. "Is that your girl inside? Violet?"

"She's Dessoir's daughter. You already know that."

"Okay, I was just asking."

"Why are you here? You have no jurisdiction over me anymore."

"No, I don't. Which should help you believe me when I say I came here to apologize."

"For what?"

"Something I failed to tell you back in the day."

Christian was growing impatient. "And that is?"

"I believe in you."

Christian laughed. "You called me a delinquent."

"Maybe you were. Maybe you still are. But I think you may have found your home."

"I've found a place to sleep."

"You've found more than that. A place to belong. I always believed you would. I should have said so."

"Why are you telling me this now? To ease your conscience?"

"It's because it occurred to me that, given all the people who believe in you, someone ought to take the trouble to tell you."

*

More seasons passed. The river rose and fell. The leaves came out each spring, the vines turned bushy and rustled with the energy of youth. Delicate shoots reached and probed, searching for something to cling to. The grass between the rows grew high.

Grapes clustered periodically in miniature bunches. The individual berries were green, opaque, and tiny. Vines carpeted the hills across the river, and browns turned to greens. Clouds brushed their shadows across the landscape.

Immanuel spent most of his waking hours in the vineyards, walking the rows with a cane, or sitting on a folding chair, talking to Aimee. Whenever he misplaced a key, a pen, his umbrella, he blamed her affectionately. “She’s up to her old tricks again.”

Sometimes Christian joined him, and the two stared quietly across the sea of leaves, until Immanuel rose and said, “Best be getting back to see what mischief Aimee’s been up to in the house.”

Christian answered, “Plenty, I’m sure.”

Christian and Violet made love late into the nights. They did so as quietly as possible, although neither believed Immanuel would hear them even if they let loose. One morning he called the two into the vat room for a talk. It was where all the serious conversations took place, so Christian figured he and Violet were going to be admonished for something, maybe all their sexual debauchery. Maybe the old man could hear them after all.

Or maybe, God forbid, he was going to lecture them about the birds and the bees.

After dropping ponderously into his chair, Immanuel sat and watched the two young people stand before him, waiting, Christian shifting his weight from one foot to the other, Violet posing erect with her hands clasped behind her back. Immanuel lifted a clipboard from his desk and handed it to Violet. He rooted around in a drawer, found a refractometer, and handed it to Christian.

“I don’t have the passion to go on,” he said.

He glanced at the vats, the quietly humming pumps, the crates of bottles, both empty and filled. He looked out the window and across the river.

“The winery is yours,” he said.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Now that Christian had inherited the Dessoir Winery he felt guilty for having even entertained the idea of working for August. He still hadn't told anyone about the offer, but the way people looked at him with baffled expressions, as they passed him on the street and encountered him in the stores, convinced him the whole town knew: He'd passed up an opportunity and chosen instead to go down with a sinking ship.

And as time went on, he was less and less sure he'd made the right decision. The work was hard, the hours were long. He had to do almost everything himself and had no background in the business. The competition—August and all the others—had grown up in the wine industry. As had Violet. Their knowledge was instinctive, whereas Christian was still learning details the hard way. He knew Violet was being careful not to correct his errors, figuring that if she did, he might lose what little confidence he had.

By the following year, he and Violet had raised their first crop together as owners. Most communication between them was nonverbal. They only needed to glance at each other, from across a room or field, to recognize what the other was thinking. They touched frequently, held hands, pressed their foreheads together, facilitating a thought flow.

In bed they held each other tensely until their muscles relaxed, until they lay loose in each other's arms and they surrendered to sleep.

Immanuel was in full retirement. Ironically, he'd never been happier. He no longer whispered to Aimee, or communicated by thought waves; he spoke out loud to her, and believed she followed him around like an invisible companion. The private relationship he'd shared with her all the years since her death was now public and transparent, as though she had rejoined the family. As though she too had a place at the table.

"Aimee, stop hiding my pipe. I know you don't want me to smoke, but it's my only remaining vice."

"Aimee, I can't hear you. Speak more clearly please."

"Aimee, what was the name of your car again? Oh yes, Bessie. Dumb name for a car."

Christian shopped at the little dry goods store in town, the one that reminded him of early pioneer stores. The counter was worn, utensils hung from low ceiling beams, and goods were sold from barrels on the floor.

As soon as he entered, the few customers present went silent, as though they'd been talking about him, or about a subject not to be shared with him. As his purchases were rung up, the cashier failed to make eye contact.

"Nice day," Christian said.

"Hmm," the woman answered.

"And a quiet one too, apparently."

She looked up at him. "You don't know, do you?"

"Know what?"

She looked down again and shook her head. "You'll see it when you get home."

See what? he wondered. It was silly to hope he would ever be accepted by these people.

On the way home he stopped in the vineyard to check the size of the berries. As he approached he could tell, even from a distance, that something was wrong.

The mood was off. Immanuel hurried down one of the rows, faster than usual, and the vines themselves seemed stricken with fear. As Christian got closer he saw it: a fine white powder dusting the leaves and grapes.

Some of the leaves were lightly spotted, some were already dying. Grapes shriveled on the vine, weeks before they were to be harvested. Christian plucked several leaves, then ran to catch up to Immanuel, who gazed at them as though paying final respects to the dead.

“This isn’t Noble Rot,” Christian said.

“No, it’s too early for Noble Rot. It’s powdery mildew. The only fungus that attacks California vineyards.”

“I’ll spray it. I’ll go back into town. Tell me what to get.”

“The only treatment at this point is liquid sulfur.” The way he spoke the last two words suggested they would be poisoning their crop to save it.

Christian turned to leave.

“Son...”

Christian stopped and looked back.

“Spray first where the vines are still relatively healthy. Save the ones that stand a chance.”

✱

Christian treated the vineyard, walking up and down the rows with a hand-held sprayer, returning to the house periodically for refills.

He ran up one row and down the other, hitting the vines from both sides. The fungus outpaced him. Over brief time the berries became misshapen, then they dried out, then they died. The leaves turned black. In the end he was only able to save half the crop.

Immanuel watched motionless from his bedroom window.

Christian and Violet worked from dawn to dusk, trying to keep the business afloat. Costs increased and revenues declined. Alone in the vat room, sitting at Immanuel's old desk, now his, Christian held the blackened remnants of grapes in his hands. They were mummified, the size of peas, and filled with spores. Spores waiting to attack next year's crop.

He went over the books one more time. No matter how he fudged the numbers, the winery would finish the season in the red. They would not be able to buy new vines, or equipment, or fertilizer. Or even food for the table.

Violet entered the room. She approached Christian from behind, slid her hand across his chest in a hug, and rested her head on his shoulder.

"I have something to tell you," she said.

"I have something as well."

"You go first."

"No, you. Mine can wait."

She leaned close to his ear and whispered, "You're going to be a papa."

After pause, Christian led her around to the front of his chair and made her sit on his lap. They kissed.

"Are you happy?" she asked.

"Ecstatic. It's something I've always wanted."

"Really?"

“Of course. My desire for it only grew more intense when I found you.”

“You’ll have to learn how to change diapers.”

“I will.”

“And play with dolls.”

“Is it a girl?”

“I don’t know. I just love the idea of you sitting on the floor, playing with dolls.”

“Okay, I’ll learn to play with dolls. And throw a football.”

They embraced silently for a minute. Violet asked, “Are you sure you’re happy?”

“I’m sure.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

“What did you need to tell me?”

He hesitated. “I think we should raise prices.”

“My father will object.”

“Tell him it’s to feed his grandchild.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Christian stepped out of the bright sunlight and into the duskiness of the Gasthaus, squinting through cigarette smoke. He spotted August sitting with two men and approached their table. The men were two he had fought during his previous visit. They froze, beer glasses halfway to their lips, and stared at him.

“Can I have a word?” he asked August.

August glanced at each of his men in turn. He gave little shakes of the head, instructing them to find another table. As they rose and shuffled away they looked back at Christian, their eyes reflecting an odd mixture of admiration and hate.

“What’ll you have?” August asked.

“Beer.”

August signaled to the waitress to bring two more.

“So,” he said smiling, “have you come for a job?”

“Actually, I’ve come for a loan.”

The smile disappeared from August’s face. “Why do you suppose I’d give you a loan?”

Christian noticed the Gasthaus’s clientele had eased away from their table, as though the two men were gunfighters, and stray bullets might find unlucky targets.

“To save the winery. To save your brother from bankruptcy. To help provide for your future grandniece or nephew.”

August raised his eyebrows.

“Violet is pregnant,” Christian explained.

“Congratulations. So is my daughter Alexandra.”

“I’ll be sure to tell Immanuel.”

The beers arrived and the two men raised them in a toast.

“To grandnieces and nephews,” August said.

“To grandnieces and nephews. So, about the loan.”

“I’ll give you a loan,” August said, “but it’ll be the kind that doesn’t get repaid.”

“What kind is that?”

“I’ll buy Immanuel’s winery.” He wrote a figure on a napkin and pushed it across the table.

Christian studied the figure, frowning. “The business is worth more,” he said.

“Maybe. If it were solvent. It isn’t. This is more than you’ll get next year, when the property goes up for public auction. I’m doing you a favor. You can sell it to me, or you can sell it, for less, to the highest bidder, who will likely be me. In either case, don’t come begging for free money.”

“And if I still want to work for you?”

“That offer is no longer on the table. You see, I recruited you merely to hasten the failure of the winery. Now it appears the winery will fail even with your finger in the dam.”

“I can’t believe you’d do this. You’re no monster, August. It would be so easy for you to help. Immanuel is still your brother, despite past differences.”

“You know nothing of our past differences.”

"I know about Aimee. I'm sorry. I can only imagine how you felt. How you feel. But it was her choice, and she's gone. Immanuel is still here."

"You weren't there. You don't know how it went down. You have no right to lecture me on how to cope with the matter."

"Fair enough. But still, he's your brother, and Violet is your niece."

"If only it were that simple."

Christian shoved his chair back and stood up.

"When I walked in here," he said, "it was to beg. I grant you that. But it's Violet and her unborn child I'm begging on behalf of. I'm asking you to put aside your animosity toward Immanuel for the sake of others who are innocent of any perceived wrongdoing."

"Perceived? Aimee was the love of my life!"

"And her bloodline lives on in her daughters and grandchild. There's no pretty way to paint this situation. We need your help. Your family needs your help. Aimee's offspring need your help."

August's gaze was fixed on the surface of the table. His mouth was tightly closed and his jaw was clenched. He said, "I do care about Violet. I care about all the girls. The best thing you can do for them is convince Immanuel to sell his winery."

He cared about the girls. Christian felt he'd achieved a breakthrough. He said, "When Immanuel suffers, so do his daughters. So do Aimee's future grandchildren. *So does Aimee.*"

August looked up at him sharply. But this time Christian saw something in August's eyes he hadn't seen before, the pain that is the progenitor of compassion.

Christian took one last sip of beer. "Thanks for the drink," he said.

★

They survived through the turn of the year. The temperature dropped to the 50s during the day, the 40s at night, occasionally lower, threatening frost. The skies were gray, ponderous with rain, and the vines squatted naked and wet on soggy ground.

Christian, Violet, and Immanuel lived frugally, mostly on flour mixed with broth, fried in grease. Fried potatoes. Day-old bread from the bakery. Occasionally meat from the butcher, always ground, always at closing time.

Violet became adept at extending foods, by adding rice or beans, by shrinking portions. By making soup thin, so they could all have second helpings. Her pregnancy limited her chores, especially outdoors. Christian picked up the slack. He only once made the mistake of suggesting they ask her sisters for help; her glowering expression was all the response he needed.

He felt he was sliding into a hole. He considered what Ramirez had said to him: that he may have found his home. But what was the definition of home? A place they hadn't yet kicked him out of? A place where he hadn't yet failed?

In late winter the mustard plants came into full bloom. Vineyards throughout the valley glowed luxuriantly golden between their rows of vines.

Immanuel pawned the remainder of Aimee's jewelry.

Christian hired himself out as often as possible to the townspeople. Gardening, janitorial work, handiwork. Anything. He even considered doing another "job" just to raise money. Violet sensed as much. She stared pointedly at him when she caught him admiring jewelry on a woman, or behind a store window, as another wife might have feared her husband was contemplating infidelity. *Don't you dare.*

She knows what I'm contemplating, Christian thought. She can read my mind.

Meanwhile costs increased and sales declined. Customers avoided the winery. The entire town knew Immanuel's place was going down. Only loyal clients, the ones who took Immanuel's side over August's, continued to buy from him. Most customers were interested in decent table wine at an affordable price, and August's business bloomed accordingly. Christian grew so disillusioned, he thought: fine. More wine for the family to drink. They needed the calories.

If only Immanuel could be of more help. If only he could practice some leadership. And if only Violet weren't so ... pregnant. She stayed indoors most of the time, and Christian had to work ever harder to keep the winery from falling into disrepair.

It was a losing battle. It was taking two steps backwards for every step forwards. It was scrambling to climb out of a hole that kept getting deeper. He was unable to keep up. He was sure of his love for Violet, but less sure of his affection for grapes.

Or fatherhood.

In the early spring, after the buds had arrived on the remaining vines, Christian woke to a rare late frost intent on ruining even more of the crop. The curled-up leaves told a story of retreat and surrender to the heartless weather.

Christian wished his own surrender were similarly decided, taken from his hands, absolving him of the responsibility of choice.

The winery had less productive acreage than ever before, less than was necessary for self sustainability. In the coming year they'd be eating their own clothes.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Christian returned from working in Mrs. Stein's garden, panting and sweating. He passed vines on his way to the house, ignoring buds on the surviving plants, evidence of spring. He ignored the baby grapes, one scant millimeter in diameter, spheres the size of fish roe. A hope, a promise, a steadfast purpose. He ignored all of it.

There were bottles to fill and label. There was a vat waiting to be racked. The lawn around the house, dormant for months, suddenly needed mowing. Instead, once inside, Christian uncorked a one-liter bottle of Riesling and sat down heavily at his desk.

Fiddling with numbers had become a daily exercise, as though adding columns again and again would somehow generate a different result, a happier result, and the winery would miraculously become profitable.

One bottle of Riesling didn't get the job done, so he opened another. The numbers refused to cooperate.

Violet entered the vat room. She was showing.

"Have you thought about when you're going to start work on the nursery?" she asked.

"Once I'm finished with the hundred other things demanding my attention."

"If you don't start now, it won't be ready in time."

"Why don't you get your father to do it?"

"My father can't work with power tools anymore, you know that." She paused. "What's wrong with you?"

"What do you think's wrong with me? Look at this!" He picked up a dead vine branch that had been sitting on his desk for a week, and waved it at her. "This is what's wrong with me."

"We're all victims of that, Christian, not just you."

"Is that so?" He threw the branch across the room. "I don't see any other victims. I look and I look, and I don't see them."

"Your child will be one of them, if you don't get it together."

Christian rose from the desk and walked the length of the vat room. He pressed his head against a vat, felt in vain for the warmth of fermentation, which had long ended, listened in vain for the sound of carbon dioxide gas escaping from the airlock, which was silent.

Violet had never spoken to him that way before. Maybe it was pregnancy hormones, or whatever. Still, she didn't have the troubles he had. She didn't have to carry the weight of the winery on her shoulders. All she had to do was waddle about the house and ask for extra pillows and inquire about the nursery.

She approached him from behind and placed her hands on his shoulders.

"Please, Christian, tell me what's going on inside your head. You're frightening me."

"I'm fine. I promise, I'm fine."

He was not fine. He had seldom been less fine in his life.

"I need your support, Christian. Now more than ever."

Hell, everyone needed his support. There wasn't enough of him to go around.

"We'll get through this," she said.

“Not without money.”

“We have what money can’t buy.”

“You’re going to say love, aren’t you?”

“Well, yes, that. And resolve. And integrity.”

“Ah, integrity. We’ve arrived at the crux of the matter.”

“Christian, don’t do this to yourself.”

“You hire someone out of prison, you shouldn’t expect he’ll have enough integrity—or any of the virtues—to run a failing winery with a smile on his gullible little face.”

“Don’t lose faith in yourself. Or us.”

“There is no ‘us’ without money, without food.”

He spun away from the vat and went back to his desk. There he packed up his papers and shoved them into a drawer.

“And I know just where to get some money,” he said. He headed for the door.

Violet grabbed him and held him back. He forced his way forward, but she clawed at him and refused to let go.

“I can’t bear to lose you again,” she cried.

They both noticed Immanuel standing in the doorway, watching them. Christian wondered how long he’d been there. They untangled and waited sheepishly.

Immanuel said, “August’s daughter Alexandra has lost her baby.” He turned and left.

Violet faced Christian. “I’m sorry,” she said.

“You have nothing to apologize for,” Christian said. “It’s me who is sorry. For everything I said. And for everything I’ve failed to do, or failed to do well.” He kissed her on the forehead, let go of her, and turned to leave.

“You’re not going to...” Violet said.

“No, I’m not.”

“Then what are you going to do?”

Christian shrugged. “I guess I’ll get to work on the nursery.”

*

Once again Immanuel’s and August’s families were on opposite sides of the church, glancing in all directions except across the aisle at each other. Angelika Dessoir, the dead baby’s great grandmother, sat alone in the front pew, her eyes closed, praying silently but fervently. She looked more angry than pious.

August sat one pew behind her, looking shell-shocked. His son Thomas and daughter-in-law Alexandra sat beside him, their eyes red and exhausted after days of open grieving.

Christian had always imagined the worst part of a funeral was when they lowered the casket into the ground. Now he decided the worst part was when the casket arrived at the church. They were seeing it for the first time.

Alexandra wept quietly as a pair of morticians wheeled her infant child down the nave and positioned it in front of the altar. Other members of the congregation sighed or moaned audibly. The morticians arranged wreaths of flowers around the miniature casket. The wreaths were on stands, trailing banners declaring which friends or family members had donated them.

Thomas rose from his pew to direct a photographer engaged to shoot the scene. He ordered each wreath photographed in turn, then instructed the photographer to stand at a distance and capture the whole tableau.

The priest spoke of the apparent unfairness of God calling a baby to Heaven, without granting it an opportunity to live a full life. Christian had long wanted an answer to that question, an answer from a presumed expert. Why, if God was all about love and compassion, did he allow so much misery? The answer that he works in mysterious ways had become such a cliché that not

even the priests used the line anymore. Why would God possibly require an innocent infant to relocate to the afterlife? What part of the universe, what mechanism, structure, or doohickey, could possibly have critical need for a squirming, babbling, fifty-centimeter-long newborn?

Christian was sure he already knew the answer. The baby was stillborn. That was all there was to it. The priests only knew what they read in a book, one written by people who knew even less. Christian nevertheless listened as the priest tried to explain. All the man came up with were a few hundred words he could have summarized with just three: “Beats me, man!”

After the ceremony, amid the clanging of church bells, the little casket was wheeled outside. Two grim-faced pallbearers lifted it from its carriage and carried it across the street to the cemetery, followed by the baby’s immediate family, then the congregation, some holding lighted candles. As they reached the open grave the bells stopped ringing and the town was silent.

August’s and Immanuel’s families stood on either side of the grave and regarded one another with distrust. Claire and Gabi were present, having come home specifically for the event. The two hadn’t changed, as far as Christian could tell. Claire still had her hair tied up. Gabi was chewing gum. She avoided eye contact with Christian, and he figured there was little point in trying to make conversation with her.

The grave was tiny, designed to fit a tiny casket, one constructed to hold a tiny baby, in a section of the cemetery devoted to infants and stillborns. The graves were packed closely together, a macabre garden of Lilliputian tombstones disclosing death dates mere weeks or days after the birth dates, and often the same day. Some graves were adorned with stuffed animals

and favorite toys. One had "Our Little Sunshine" engraved on its stone.

The attendees crowded around the small space, wedged between the cemetery's stone wall and a few somber pines. More were present in the cemetery than were in the church, because the latter hadn't contained enough seats. All together they comprised more individuals than resided in the town.

Following a short homily by the priest, the casket was lowered into the grave. Several voices cried out in moot objection. One by one the attendees approached the grave and emptied a small spade of soil onto the casket. The women dropped roses into the gaping hole.

Alexandra, the baby's mother, couldn't bring herself to drop her rose, so her husband Thomas helped her. He took her wrist and shook it gently, until the flower fell.

As people dispersed, August approached Immanuel, who was flanked by his three daughters on one side and Christian on the other.

"I'm surprised to see you here," he said.

"It's entirely appropriate that I be here," Immanuel said. "The baby is my bloodline, too."

August wrung his hands. He looked uncertainly at Christian, who stepped forward and shook his hand. "You have our condolences," Christian said.

"Well, thank you," August said, then turned and walked away.

Angelika Dessoir had stood at the back of the crowd during the burial, staring icily at the priest. Now she strode away as though what she had just witnessed was a trivial event, a traffic accident, a fender bender, rather than the funeral of her great granddaughter.

She left the cemetery and crossed the street. As she reached the church she lifted her cane and beat it against the building's outer wall.

Several men rushed to pull her away, but she resisted them, pounding her cane furiously against the cold limestone blocks.

Finally the men took her by the arms and assisted her, sobbing, to a waiting car.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

The vines grew defiantly bushy and unruly. The leaves expanded to full size, waxy, glistening, reflective. The trunks remained adamantly gnarled in contrast to vibrant verdant crowns. The berries went from five millimeters, hidden in the leaves, to 1.3 centimeters, or half an inch, and from opaque to translucent green. Tendrils curled up and sprang off in search of breeze and brightness. Canes tried to reach across rows, to confer with neighbors. Young shoots continued to emerge, to stretch, to strain toward the sun.

A sense of abandon ruled the vineyard. Vines appeared to be expressing themselves, with arms raised in rapture, performing a static dance. Birds sang joyfully, butterflies acted like they owned the damn place.

Christian thought the grapevine, more than any other crop, any other plant, seemed sentient, seemed to have moods and ambitions.

And yet the vineyard was quiet, listening. The mood was lethargic. The atmosphere was one of waiting, preparing, deferring ... to what? In the hills across the river the vines were lush green, in checkerboard rows, mottled, the horizon fading to pale blue.

The grapes ripened and swelled. The largest leaves were as broad as a man's hand. Grape bunches hung low, weighing the vines down.

The rains came, heavier than anyone remembered, and later than usual. The vineyard was rain-soaked, wet-fresh. The leaves sparkled with beads of water.

Then heartless, incessant showers. They fell in torrents, with winds that whipped pedestrians and stole their umbrellas. They drenched the town, beat against rooftops. Water cascaded down streets, turning them into ambitious little creeks. The wind drove the rain obliquely, hurling it against windows and sweeping sidewalks clean of both two- and four-legged creatures.

Lightning rent the darkened skies, illuminating once-proud trees that now cowered in erratic strobe-like flashes.

With the ill-tempered wind came flooding. The Rotenbach spilled its banks and submerged the floodplain. Water swamped the lower-lying vines. Christian worried the vines weren't getting the seasonal light they needed. Also that microclimates in the vineyard would become ideal environments for mildew.

The floods took the bridge out, and Delheim was isolated.

"We have everything we need," Immanuel said. He stared out the window at the downpour and mumbled, "Pretty much."

Violet was showing generously now, and Immanuel affectionately called her The Penguin. She watched the rain through the living room window while listening to Christian play the piano.

She asked her father, "The vineyard will be okay, won't it? It will survive this, right?"

Immanuel looked at her blankly. After a moment Christian answered for him.

“Either way, there’s nothing we can do about it. Might as well spend the time relaxing productively.”

However, when he returned to playing, he hit the keys harder than before.

*

The next morning brought more calamity. Christian woke early to the sound of hailstones pounding the roof. He looked out the window and watched grape-sized shot bounce off the streets and sidewalks and hammer parked cars.

He dressed quickly. Violet yawned and asked, “What’s going on?”

“More bad news,” he said, and left the room

Outside in the yard he irrationally tried to shield vines with his body, crouching over one after another. He ran into the vineyard, dashing from row to row as hailstones careened from the sky like meteorites and pummeled his back and shoulders.

The stones grew to nearly the size of walnuts, and ricocheted off slabs of slate covering the soil. They struck trees, breaking small branches. They zeroed in on vines, shattering them, turning grapes into dripping bags of pomace.

Christian yelled at the sky, “Take it all, damn you! Take everything!”

Violet waddled into the vineyard in her nightgown, stepping over miniature ice boulders, one arm covering her head, the other protecting her protruding belly.

“Christian, come inside. There’s nothing you can do.”

He regarded her with astonishment. “You’re pregnant!”

“You noticed?”

“It’s dangerous out here. Get back inside.”

Violet pointed across the vineyard. “My father is out there.”

“Get inside. I’ll take care of him.”

Christian found Immanuel standing among the vines. The hail had subsided, but small crystals continued to strike Immanuel about the head and shoulders. He was mumbling. Christian took him by the arm.

“Come inside, Old Man.”

“Aimee. I can’t find her.”

“She’s safe. Come inside.”

“She’s been out here the whole time. Alone.”

“She knows how to take care of herself.”

Christian pulled on his arm and led him back to the house. He didn’t resist. He mumbled, “I can’t find her. Where is she? I can’t find her.”

✱

The hailstorm damaged vineyards for miles around. August’s property suffered serious harm, but would recover. The less solvent wineries, like the Dessoir, could not afford the ill luck.

After studying the books for an hour, trying to find a way out of the hole, Christian went in search of Immanuel. He found him in the dining room, tasting wine. Bottles from as far back as twenty vintages were arrayed before him, and he was sampling them with a shot glass.

Christian sat down across from him and asked, “Quality control?”

Immanuel took a sip and answered, “Visiting old friends. Here, introduce yourself to this one.”

Christian took the shot glass. In front of Immanuel was a half-empty bottle of a twelve-year-old Riesling.

“Look at the color,” Immanuel said.

“It’s aging. It’s going.”

“No, it’s achieving its prime. Taste it.”

Christian did. "Like I said, it's going."

"Okay, try this one."

Immanuel poured another glass, but this time covered the label.

Christian sipped the wine. "Better," he said. "Fresher, crisper."

"Fifteen years old."

Christian looked at the shot glass in surprise, then checked the label on the bottle.

"You see?" Immanuel said. "Your judgment of the previous one was biased by your knowledge of its age. The truth always comes out in a blind tasting. One way or another."

Christian cleared his throat. "Sir, the winery is going under."

"You can't judge a wine by its label."

"The hailstorm was the last straw. There have been too many calamities. We're not going to recover from this one."

"The vines will recover. They always do."

"The business won't. We've lost the harvest."

Immanuel shrugged. "Maybe you've only misplaced it."

"I'm not kidding."

"Neither am I. This is just another storm to weather." He looked out the window. It was streaked with rain. "In more ways than one."

"I don't think you understand the gravity of the situation."

"Oh, I do. All too well. If you'd seen the calamities I've faced over the years, you'd know how durable, how resilient, vines are. You'd give them more credit, and be in less of a rush to give up on them. You'll learn in time: worry doesn't fatten grapes."

"We have an offer to buy the vineyard, and I think you should consider it."

"An offer?"

Christian removed a napkin from his pocket and handed it over. "The buyer wrote the number. That's his offer."

Immanuel looked at the handwriting quizzically. "And who might the buyer be?"

"Your brother."

Immanuel crumpled the napkin and tossed it on the floor.

"You've learned a lot during your stay here, Christian. But you keep failing at one lesson. When you have a passion for something—anything, big or small—you don't let obstacles defeat you. When you're on the right path you see obstacles as opportunities."

"So maybe I don't have the same passion for this business you have. Maybe a career isn't an all-or-nothing proposition."

"Your choice of career *is* an all-or-nothing proposition. When you spend your life pursuing the right one."

"How do I know if I am?"

After a long pause Immanuel answered, "If you have to ask that question, you already know the answer."

Violet stumbled into the room, clutching her abdomen.

"Something's wrong," she said.

Immanuel rose and said to Christian, "Fetch the midwife."

Chapter Thirty

The midwife, a harried, disheveled woman with a square face, pushed past Christian when he opened the door for her. She shook off her umbrella and headed wordlessly for Violet's room.

Violet sat on the edge of the bed, still holding her abdomen. Immanuel stood next to the bed, the picture of uselessness.

Rain slapped the window. The storm's energy had abated but its fury had not ebbed.

"What is it, honey?" The midwife took violet by the chin and stared into her eyes.

"It feels like period pain. I know they can't be contractions, because it's too early. Also, my lower back hurts. A lot. And then it doesn't. And then it does."

"What does that mean?" Immanuel asked.

"It means she's going into labor."

"But it's too early!" Violet protested.

"It's never too early for early labor."

The midwife eased Violet onto her back. "Lie still, honey." She glanced at Immanuel. "Please excuse us." Then at Christian. "Bring the basket in from my car."

The basket contained a first aid kit and a stack of vinyl tablecloths. The midwife spread the tablecloths over the bed and the floor around it, making Violet lift herself so she could reach

beneath her. Turning to Christian she said, "Now I need water, washcloths, paper towels, and a large, clean beach towel, if you have one."

In response to Christian's curious look she said, "To wrap the baby when it comes. While we're at it, any favorite music?"

"I don't know," Christian said. "I kind of like Red Hot Chili Peppers."

"*Her* favorite music."

"Neil Diamond," Violet said. "And Elton John."

"Get it," the midwife ordered Christian. "And a bucket."

Christian hesitated.

"Don't worry, it's not for blood, it's for vomit." She stared at him for a second. "Maybe even *your* vomit. Gather some healthy snacks, too. And tea, lots of tea."

"What about wine?" Immanuel asked. He had not yet excused himself.

The midwife hesitated. "Yes, a good Cabernet."

"Do you think it's wise for her to consume alcohol?" Christian asked.

"Not for her, for her father."

Violet pressed her hands against her abdomen and groaned. The midwife removed a stethoscope and blood pressure meter from the first aid kit and performed a physical exam.

"The contractions are getting frequent," she said.

"Oh my God!" Violet said. "The baby's coming."

"Everyone out," the midwife ordered.

As she closed the door she said to the two men, "Don't worry, I've done this a hundred times."

✱

Christian and Immanuel waited at the dining room table, listening to the rain pound the roof. The midwife shuttled between

the bedroom and the kitchen. Each time she passed by, Christian looked up hopefully, but she neither returned his glances nor spoke a word.

The rain intensified. Immanuel played Solitaire and hummed little tunes. The clock on the wall ticked monotonously. The midwife came and went, rinsing things in the kitchen sink.

“An update would be appreciated,” Christian said to her.

Immanuel looked up from his playing cards, as if noticing the midwife for the first time.

“She’s bleeding some,” the midwife said. “But that’s normal. I’m concerned about her small frame. This might be a long labor.”

She returned to the bedroom.

Immanuel said, “Men have sweated for millennia as their wives gave birth. It’s never helped.”

Christian rose and went to the window. The vines were withstanding the onslaught, and he thought of Violet facing her own battle. She was one of them. She came from the Earth, as they had. She bloomed and would bear fruit. But she wasn’t made of the same stock.

The storm lashed at the window, as if to warn Christian the worst was yet to come.

Violet’s labor continued into the night. Christian didn’t just sweat the birth, he fought a rising panic, one that had been building since he first arrived at the Dessoir Winery.

He didn’t belong here. He would never belong here.

He’d never belonged anywhere. Except maybe San Quentin, and The Corners. In a cruelly honest evaluation of himself, as much as he’d hated both prisons, he’d always believed they were home. They were where he belonged.

He deserved to be locked up. He was a thief and a convict, and the love of his life was hemorrhaging in the next room, and all he wanted to do was run. What do bad guys do in situations like this? They run. That's how they know they're bad guys.

The midwife passed through the dining room again and said, "She's still bleeding. I'm calling a doctor."

Christian stood up from the table. "You said bleeding was normal."

"Not this much bleeding. A doctor can induce labor and stop the bleeding." She went into the kitchen.

Christian left the dining room and quietly entered the bedroom. It was their shared bedroom, but now it felt alien to him.

Violet was pale, sweating, and breathing rapidly. As Christian leaned over her, she opened her eyes. She smiled.

"Don't worry, Sweetie," Christian said. "We'll fix this."

"*You* stop worrying. I'm fine."

"Can I get you anything?"

"No, Edith is doing a good job."

"She says you're bleeding."

"Yes, but the doctor will stop that." She closed her eyes and pressed her hands against her abdomen. "Everything will be fine ... once the doctor gets here."

"I'm worried about you."

"Don't be."

"I came here to comfort you, and you're comforting me."

"Really. Don't worry. I'm fine."

He sat at the edge of the bed. "Have you thought of names for the baby?"

"I can't come up with anything." She took several deep breaths. "When I come up with a boy name, I think, what if it's a girl? And if I come up with a girl name, I can't help imagining

it being a boy..." She paused and grimaced. "...and how awkward it would be for him to have a girl's name. I know it's dumb."

Christian took her by the hand and kissed her forehead. Her skin was pale. The midwife had not yet returned. He glanced around the room uncomfortably, as if he might find answers in a corner somewhere. An antidote to his fears. A solution to the vineyard, to his impulse to run, to Violet's condition and the fate of their unborn child.

The rain continued to fall, hard.

Violet watched him, the pain in her eyes softened by love. She said, "It's not there, babe. It's not anywhere in the room."

"Excuse me?"

She spoke in measured gasps, taking deep breaths between sentences.

"It's not the room. It's not the space. It's the people who occupy it. It's not the winery. It's the people who work it. It's you and me. Just keep that in mind. Wherever you are. Whatever happens. It's not the room. Or the house. Or the town. It's not even the ocean of stars. And it sure as hell isn't a jail cell. It's just you and me."

She winced, then settled back down.

"Do you want me to get the midwife?" Christian asked.

"No. Do you remember the day we met?"

"Of course. I remember you peeking at me from behind your sisters. You were adorable."

"Were?"

"Are. Back then you never smiled with your mouth open, because you had a gap between your front teeth."

"Thanks for reminding me."

"It too was adorable. Your father asked you what day it was. It was Saturday. Do you remember what you said?"

“My favorite.”

“And then you asked me if I was a criminal.”

She bit her lip and shuddered, then quieted down again.

“Are you?” she asked. “A criminal?”

“I’m just a man.” After a moment Christian added, “And a criminal.”

The midwife poked her head into the room and said to Christian, “I need to talk to you for a moment.”

He kissed Violet. “I’ll be right back.”

In the hallway the midwife conferred with Christian and Immanuel. “She’s sinking. Her complications require a hospital, or at least a doctor. Unfortunately no doctor can make it. I’ve been calling and calling. Doctors are stretched thin as it is, and ongoing rains have washed out roads and bridges. As you know, the bridge over the Rotenbach is out. Floodwaters have isolated the town. We’re stuck until the waters recede.”

“We’ll take her to the hospital,” Christian said. “We’ll take her by boat. We’ll build a raft if necessary.”

“Without proper medical supervision, she can’t be moved. Certainly not in a boat or raft on a raging river. She’s not strong enough for such a journey. A doctor or ambulance must come. One or the other. And she has to hold on until that happens.”

“What if it doesn’t happen?” Immanuel asked. “What if no one can come until the flooding is over?”

The midwife opened her mouth to speak, then changed her mind. She looked at Immanuel until realization softened his expression.

Christian returned to Violet’s side. “A doctor is on his way,” he told her. “You’re going to be fine.”

“Told you so.”

He put his arms around her and held her.

She said, "Will you get Mama's locket for me?"

"Which locket?"

"You know the one. The one with her and Papa's pictures in it."

"Sure, I know the one." It was the one he'd considered stealing years ago. He fetched it from Immanuel's room, worried about leaving Violet unattended, but confident he only needed a minute because he knew exactly where it was.

On his way back to Violet's room he opened the locket. It contained pictures of Immanuel on one side and Aimee on the other, taken on their wedding day. Immanuel was dressed inauthentically; Christian could make out a tie at the bottom of the miniature oval frame. The middle-aged man, as a young man, wearing the same know-it-all expression and regarding the camera with the same whimsical eyes. His hair was fuller and darker, his cheeks thinner.

And Aimee. Defiant and uncompromising and playful, all at the same time.

Back in Violet's bedroom, Christian helped her clasp the thin chain around her neck. Her skin felt clammy. She fondled the locket for a moment, then said, "Remember when I slept on the floor next to your bed?"

"Yes."

"Sleep on the floor next to mine."

★

Christian intended to remain awake all night. But exhaustion overwhelmed him and he slept, however fitfully.

Whenever before in his life he'd faced trauma, he'd escaped from it. Now he dreamed of being chased. It wasn't clear who or what was chasing him, but it must have been some kind of wild animal, or dangerous man, or something that made sense to run

away from. In fact, he'd been chased by many dangerous men. Maybe not dangerous to society—police officers, parole officers, stiffed fences—but dangerous to him.

In this dream, however, it wasn't clear. A shadowy entity. A silent looming thing that, when it caught him, would inflict pain. That's all you're running from, he thought to his dreaming self. Pain. A four-letter word. Inflicted by others. Sometimes the result of your own Work—another four-letter word.

Immanuel would say the best way to avoid pain was to confront it. The best way to make work not cause pain was to do the work, because work itself was relatively painless. It was the fear of work, the anticipation of work, and the consequences of procrastination that caused most of the pain.

It was running away that caused the pain.

Yet as he felt the silent, shadowy entity loom in on him in his dream, Christian ran as he always had before. It was so much easier to run from the thing than face it, than do the necessary work. In the past, he'd enjoyed greater success running, he'd been faster on his feet, quicker off the blocks. He'd prided himself on his ability to escape. He'd patted himself on the back each time he outwitted The Thing.

In the middle of the night he woke with a start. Shadows criss-crossed his face. It was the midwife, caring for Violet.

"And?" Christian whispered.

"Still hemorrhaging."

He lifted himself from the floor and leaned over Violet. She was unconscious. Pale as a porcelain doll. Circles had formed under her eyes; she already looked half-dead.

Around her neck hung the locket. He opened it. Immanuel and Aimee, side by side. This time, in the semi-darkness, Aimee seemed to look straight at him. Glowing auburn eyes, radiating

a lust for life. Violet's mother. Or even Violet herself, in an earlier incarnation.

"Sweetie?" Christian said to her. "Sweetie?"

"She can't hear you," the midwife said.

Violet's mouth was agape. Her eyes were open, just a slit, and lifeless.

Christian stumbled out of the room. He entered the living room, where he found friends and neighbors gathered with Immanuel, as though for a wake. They had pulled chairs from the dining room table, formed a circle along the walls, and were drinking coffee and mumbling quietly among themselves.

As Christian stepped among them, the room went silent.

They knew.

The priest, balancing a saucer on his knee, nodded to him. He nodded back. He also nodded to Mrs. Becker.

"How are your tomatoes?" he asked her.

"Fine," she said. She glanced around for moral support. "They're ... fine."

The Waldorfs were present, with all four of the children, all four asleep at the feet of their parents. As was Mr. Edelman, Mr. Eckes, Mrs. Grunewald.

Mrs. Stein reached out to Christian and took his hand. "I've never thanked you for all you've done for me."

It was something you said to someone you should have thanked, but never did, and were doing so now because the mother of his child was on her deathbed.

"Don't mention it," Christian said. "I'm happy to help."

Mr. Faber, Mr. Tullius, the Winklers.

Mr. Grimm rose and said, "If you need any help in the vineyard..."

A general murmur signaled agreement. Christian thought, because the love of my life is dying, that's why you offer to help trim shoots and spurs.

"Thank you," Christian said. "It means a lot to me."

The midwife entered the room. They all looked at her in silence.

"The baby is breeched," she said. "It needs to come out. I've been trying and failing to turn it into the proper position."

"How is Violet doing?" Christian asked.

"She's still unconscious, and still hemorrhaging." The midwife approached Christian and stepped up close to him. "Maybe you'd better start building that raft."

Immanuel jumped up, holding the phone, and asked everyone to be quiet.

"Don't bother with a raft," he said to Christian. "An ambulance is on its way. A backroad has been cleared."

The room hummed with expressions of relief, and a couple of the older women cried out in joy.

"When will it arrive?" The midwife asked.

"Tomorrow morning. Hopefully before noon."

The midwife looked at Christian.

He asked, "Will she last that long?"

The midwife looked away. She shook her head.

Chapter Thirty-One

Christian left the house. He stood on the front steps and watched rain beat against the street. The world was dark and swampy. Across the river, he could just make out spectral shadows of vines surrendering to the storm.

His breathing was heavy, and he told himself to calm down. Then he heard himself whisper out loud, “Run.”

Calm down. Stay where you are.

Run.

Catch your breath, you’ll need it.

Run.

He had always run from the cops. After all, bad guys are bad guys even when they’re doing good. The cops might as well have been zombies, the way they ambled through the community, searching for victims. If they couldn’t find a bad guy, they made one. They planted evidence. They lied in their reports, in their testimonies. For what good is a cop who doesn’t catch bad guys? And what do you need cops for if no one is being bad?

Run. Had he ever done differently, when faced with insurmountable obstacles?

Run. He had run from confinement, even as a boy, when sent to his room. He’d escaped out the window and spent the night on the streets. He’d relished the idea of his parents pacing the

living room floor, worried about what might be happening to him, out there in the urban jungle. He'd imagined them wiping away tears, vowing to hug him and kiss him and love him, and buy him the video game he wanted, instead of slapping him so hard he fell over the coffee table and bloodied his nose, instead of sending him to his room for bleeding on the rug.

If only he'd come home safe. If only, if only.

And when he returned to the house the next morning, if only he hadn't found his parents asleep in their beds, and if only they hadn't whipped him with the buckle end of their belts when they woke, hung over.

Run. He had run from incarceration, whenever he could. He broke out of The Corners twice, and was caught both times. Once because he got tangled in the barbed wire on the way out, and again, when he made it through the barbed wire but was chased down by guards and dogs as he crossed a bare field, a field kept bare for the very purpose of chasing down juvenile delinquent escapees who couldn't outrun guards and dogs. He'd been planning a third attempt when he was "paroled" to the Dessoir winery.

Run. Isn't running the rational thing to do, when no viable alternative exists? Isn't running what animals do when predators are after them?

Run. He had run from responsibility too, even the hint of it. Because responsibility was just a synonym for confinement. The chains were invisible, but they existed just the same. And they were harder to escape from than concrete walls, iron bars, and barbed wire fences. When you got to the other side of physical barriers you left no part of you behind. No regret, no doubt, no qualms, no guilt. When you got to the other side of responsibility, you left the better parts of yourself behind. And you carried

the bottomless ache of knowing people were disappointed in you.

He imagined them all receding into his past, fading from view. Shaking their heads. And there was no going back to fix things. People had their first impressions. And their second and third. And nothing you could do would make them trust you again.

Run. But what about standing and fighting? Going down in glory? Staying to the bitter end?

The end of what?

Run. Until he arrived at the Dessoir winery he had run from every kind of work, because the work had always been for someone else. The work had always benefitted others. In prison his compensation had been little more than sustenance, which he earned for breathing, staying out of trouble, and successfully wiping himself. The sustenance, the compensation, had always been laced with criticism. No matter how well he performed, he could always have performed better. They considered this “encouragement.” He saw it as confirmation he was a failure. It was never enough, and it was never good enough, and he was never adequate to anyone’s purpose.

Even romantic partners behaved that way. Do better, be better. He had run from commitment, from long-term relationships, from love. It was just another form of confinement.

Violet loved him. Run.

He left the front steps of the house and began to trot. He told himself he was just looking for the doctor, just gathering wood to build a raft. He headed for the bridge across the Rotenbach. He knew the bridge was down—they were all down—but other directions made even less sense. He had to run, and he had to choose a direction.

Another thunderstorm was on the rise. The nighttime darkness was turning black. Streetlamps were out, no doubt because electrical lines were down. It was like being in a cave with the fire doused. Darker than dark, darker than blindness. Because you knew you could see, if only there was light. Then intermittent bolts of lightning. The landscape flickered on and off.

He stumbled over curbs, groping his way toward the bridge. Maybe enough of it was still intact to somehow get across. All it would take was a plank, a stubborn chunk of wood, an unwitting lifeline to freedom.

As he neared the bridge, he confirmed it had indeed collapsed. Beams like fallen rafters littered the swiftly moving current, projecting at odd angles into the river. A concept in disarray, a jangled tableau, a study in reckless entropy.

The river was gorged and distended with angry, broiling water. The current was a violent cataract surging down a channel struggling to contain it. The loose pile of wood, stubborn though it may have been, would be of no help. There was no getting across.

Should he turn back? And face what? He hadn't solved anything since leaving the house. Should he continue upstream and search for another crossing? Given the weather reports and forecasts, it seemed pointless. In fact, this whole "escape" was beginning to look pointless.

He heard cries for help.

At first he dismissed them as an aberration, or one of those strange sounds an angry river makes when feeling confined by its banks.

He heard them again. A woman's voice, from the direction of the water.

He approached the bank. The water was the color of slate, and seething. Each wave competed with the others and was bashed about before it could fully form. A body of water wrestling with itself, fractured and furious.

A car sat in the current. Not just any car, but a Bentley, an old-timer, a model not seen on the road in years. Round peering headlights, a snub-nosed engine, and raised fenders. It had obviously crashed into the river when the bridge gave way, and may itself have caused the bridge to collapse.

Inside the car was a woman. Her window was partly open and she was calling for help. The water level was rising. Any minute the water would reach the window and pour into the car. The woman was unable to push her door open against the on-rushing current, and clearly didn't want to get out on the other side, for fear of being swept downstream.

Christian's first impulse was to turn and run. Again, anywhere, upstream, downstream, back to the house, hollering for help, if that would help. But his legs wouldn't move. This wasn't something you could run away from.

He grabbed a plank from the collapsed bridge and extended it to the car's fender. Then he waded to the car, holding onto the plank, bracing himself against the current. His feet slid around on the muddy bottom of the river. The current was muscular and dogged. The river beat against him. The landscape lit up for brief moments as lightning rent the night.

He could feel an undertow trying to take his legs out from under him, as though the river was angered by his presence, his invasion, his efforts to rescue one of its victims. Or else its waters were in such a hurry to reach their destination downstream, they didn't care who they swamped along the way.

Christian pulled the woman out through the window and half dragged, half carried her along the plank to safety. He helped her onto the bank.

She turned to face him.

For a moment, in a flash of lightning, he got a look at her face. The recognition was instant. An attractive brunette with shoulder-length curls. A beauty from a previous generation. Gazing at him soberly with intense auburn eyes.

The plank snapped, and the current swept Christian away. The woman watched stoically, her face receding into the darkness, as he tumbled downstream.

He battled undercurrents to keep his nose above water, to keep it above the debris rushing downstream with him toward ever deeper and violently churning rapids. The water was cold, his hands and feet grew numb.

He calculated he wouldn't escape the Rotenbach before it dumped him into the Napa River, which he was sure was itself a violent beast. The Napa was a run-of-the-mill river when placid, but potent and livid when swollen with floodwaters.

The Rotenbach wrestled with him, heaved him, lashed at him, roughed him up. He spied a place on the bank ahead, where a meander had cut into a vineyard and exposed the gnarly, sinuous roots of grape vines. He struggled to reach the bank just as the river twisted and threatened to dash him on the rock field ahead.

He kicked, paddled, and squirmed. Almost there, almost there, and the current manhandled him, dragged him back. He extended his arm to grasp at scrub and missed by inches. A few more seconds, and he'd be hurled against boulders in the stream, behemoths that split the onrushing water like the bows of ships.

At the last second he lunged, snagged a root, and hung on. The river reacted in fury, the undertow climbing up to his waist, pulling so hard he thought his arms would leave their sockets. Determinedly, hand over hand, he pulled himself up to the top of the bank.

Once safe on sturdy soil he dropped to his hands and knees and sobbed. He sobbed over the abuse he'd suffered as a child, over the life he'd wanted and never had.

A bird's nest, empty, on the ground, the summation of all tragedy.

He dug his fingers into the soil. Violet was dying. She was about to become yet another footprint in his life, an echo on the breeze (now don't go getting poetic!), a memory to bury under all the others. And why not? Hadn't everyone else he'd loved turned to ashes, chemically or metaphorically? What's one more? Each time he'd lost someone he'd lost a piece of himself. Their voices once mingled with his, but only his remained. Eventually their footprints were obliterated. The waves they made diminished and disappeared. Even the breeze, God bless its poetic soul, forgot their names.

Nothing is so irrepressible as a blithe and gathering wind.

People used words like "cherished," "remembrance," "eternity." They visited graves, pulled weeds, mumbled regrets. They reminded themselves how lucky they were to have known the dead, to have intersected with their paths in space and time. The dead, of course, were indifferent to the tardy grievers.

Death is a murmuring forest, with countless untrodden paths, and mysteries enough for wide-eyed explorers.

Christian straightened up to his knees and prayed. He didn't know how, he only knew he had to say something. And even if

no one was listening, it would still sound like praying, so the box would be checked.

He'd learned some profound lessons in his life, but was at a loss how to make use of them. He'd never be young again, never arrive at a vineyard and meet an adorable little girl again, a girl who would develop a crush on him, a crush that would bloom into love. He'd never wake to find that girl sleeping on the floor next to his bed.

As the road recedes, memories linger like distant farm lights, while darkness cloaks all the rest.

He knew he ought to apply his lessons, but how? To whom? How to employ such knowledge, such training, on the huddled masses, the great unwashed? When the love of your life is dead, what's the point? How to justify dispensing wisdom on the faceless, the undeserving, the inconsequential? How to appreciate the beauty in people, like a portrait artist turned cartoonist?

The child lives on in the adult, like the echo of laughter in an abandoned playground.

Then again, who knew what lay ahead. He hadn't known, when he arrived in Delheim, that Violet Dessoir would become the love of his life. Maybe better times were ahead after all. Maybe other paths were yet to intersect with his. Maybe penguins would learn to fly.

Suicide is patient with a beating heart, yet restless with one that is broken.

Christian glanced at the churning water and felt a flash of regret for saving himself. It would have been so much easier, not only for himself, but for the Dessoir family and the Delheim community, not to mention the judicial system, if he just drowned and washed downstream and floated up somewhere, to be found by a fisherman. The catch of the day!

He'd never regretted anything before; it was a novel feeling. "I regret not having died," he practiced saying to himself. He looked at the river and repeated himself: "I regret being alive."

The path neither schemes nor plots to make you slip and fall. Nor does the wind, when it howls, call your name.

All his mistakes and knee-scrapes had made him what he was, and it was all a waste. Even his love for Violet was a waste. If her mission in dying was to wake him up, make him appreciate the value of relationships, well, Sweetie, you failed, you flopped, you tanked.

Rain puddles are clouds reincarnated, are footprints left in a dream.

He didn't believe in an afterlife, yet he sensed that what he felt for Violet would survive him. And if life was just a warm-up, if there was another dimension he'd occupy after giving up the ghost in this one—if he got another chance to do it right—well, let's be honest, he'd do it exactly the same way, even hitting that bully in the back of the head with a brick, even making that jewelry salesman pee his pants in fear.

He'd avoid responsibility. He'd commit crimes and brag about them to his lowlife friends. He'd love a little girl and run for the hills the moment she needed him most. Iteration X and iteration X+1 were destined to be identical. That's what fate was all about. If you actually got a chance to do it all over, you'd do it the same way again. You'd make the same inexplicable decisions and commit the same shortsighted mistakes.

Because the circumstances would be repeated. Looking back from the present, of course what you did was lame-brained, but it wasn't lame-brained back then. Back then it made perfect sense to take money from people, to hit them in the backs of their

heads with bricks. Darwin and all. Your place in the natural order. Your roost in the food chain.

Someone had once told Christian that relationships were like tapestries. None is complete or perfect, and we should concentrate on the beautiful threads and intricate patterns rather than the gaps or frayed ends. That person had also believed there would be additional chances, in other times and places, to add to the tapestries, to enlarge, repair, and improve them.

And of course, to be honest, that person was naive. Tapestries consisted of nothing more than thread. Gaps? Are you kidding? You mean the gaping holes?

Tears become lost in the downpours of summer, but still find their way to the ground.

A counselor once tried to convince Christian that no one actually dies. If a tropical storm on one side of the globe couldn't be predicted because of the unpredictable flap of a butterfly's wings on the other, surely the words we speak and the steps we take will forever ripple on the Earth. And if we live on in the hearts of those who knew us, we live on in the hearts of those who know them in turn. We affect all other living beings instantaneously, like dominoes laid end-to-end. The static you hear is the echo of every voice that ever hummed. Violet's was already joining others in the breeze. (There's that lame poetry again!)

The moon is scarcely moved by all the poetry written about it.

Christian prayed for Violet. He prayed for the one person he had ever loved, the one passion he'd ever known. He would return someday, he promised himself, to visit her grave. Not too often; he didn't want to be a nuisance. For now, though, he had to get out of there.

He'd age and drink the wines of her last harvest. He'd communicate with her. He'd aim his voice at the darkest corner of

the room, probably a jail cell, and he'd imagine her translucent figure, bug-eyed and smiling, hanging on his every word. He'd beg her never to stop visiting him, speaking to him.

A sparrow sang, and we listened. Surely we listened. Promise me we listened.

The priest in the confessional had given him penance to recite. "Our Fathers" and "Hail Marys." And he'd recited none of it. Maybe it wasn't too late.

"Our Father, who art in Heaven..." He couldn't remember the rest. "Hail Mary, full of grace..." He beat his fist against the ground in frustration. "Bless us oh Lord, and these Thy gifts..."

Out of the rotted timbers of his tumble-down life, he would build a cathedral. It too would collapse.

He stood up. It was time to leave. He took one step and stopped. His legs refused to take him further. Not in the direction he intended to go. Not away from his problems.

It's not the space, she had said, it's the people who occupy it. It's not the winery, it's the family who works it, the livelihoods it sustains. It's the passion you experience making something, and making it the best way you can, the only way you can. It's you and me.

Keep that in mind, wherever you are, whatever happens. It's not the room or the house or the town or even the ocean of stars. It's just you and me.

"Choose" is the most powerful word in any language.

He took another step and stopped again.

He turned around.

He had to be with her, no matter her fate. He had to be there when she died. For if her soul were to leave her body—if any of that stuff happened to be true—he had to let it pass through his

arms on its way. And after she was gone, he had to give her life consequence. Otherwise his would have none.

A girl whose eyes are alight with creation's first fire holds me fiercely in the cold pouring rain.

He wanted to believe in an afterlife. He wanted to believe they'd be together again. He wanted to believe a way would find them.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Christian entered the living room drenched and dirty. It was filled with townspeople. They stared at him, at his clothes, at the grass stains on his knees, at the river debris in his hair. At wet footprints left as he crossed the room.

He didn't care. He was done with being inauthentic. This was him, the real him, the man who ran, who had nowhere to go, otherwise he'd be somewhere else now, so he'd returned, soaked and filthy and tracking prints in the carpet. This was him.

He stared back. He met their critical gazes until, one by one, they turned away. Friends, neighbors, extended family, everyone of consequence was present, still conducting a vigil, and their numbers had grown. The room emitted a quietness that unnerved him, an invisible yet lingering fog of death. He'd always thought such expressions were silly. No longer: *death was in the air*.

Mrs. Stein watched Christian as though he might suddenly become violent. She seemed poised to leap to safety. Mr. Edelmänn's long nose looked even longer, and he looked down it at Christian. But most of the people in the room had compassion in their eyes.

August Dessoir's youngest daughter was present, and even though her baby, born a week ago, hadn't survived, she was now nursing one.

Immanuel extracted himself from a whispered conversation and steered Christian toward the infant girl.

"Your daughter," he said.

Christian touched the baby's head. Sparse hair, fat cheeks, eyes clenched as it suckled. He couldn't immediately make a connection with her. She could be anyone's baby, even one snatched from a maternity ward and planted in this room to give him comfort.

August's daughter looked at Christian with eyes that were empty from the loss of her own child. Yet they also expressed stubborn determination. Christian could almost hear her thoughts: "I will serve a baby. If not mine, then this one. And someday, one of my own."

But Violet, Christian wondered. What about Violet? If this woman was nursing their child...

He turned toward the bedroom. Immanuel and others stepped aside to make passage for him. When he reached Violet's bedside, the midwife rose and departed the room, closing the door behind her. The two were alone.

You can't trust anyone, Christian thought. They up and die on you. Or they abandon you some other way. They kick you aside, then they up and die on you. Violet was doing what everyone else he'd ever cared about had done. She was upping and dying on him. But who else had he really cared about?

He supposed he had loved his parents, until they left. You're supposed to love your parents, so he must have, in a way. Maybe some school friends. An early girlfriend or two. That is, until he taught himself to stop feeling that way, to treat people with sus-

picion, because sooner or later they'd be gone from his life, and they'd leave pain of one kind or another in their wake. As Violet would shortly.

She was inert, and her skin was deathly pale. Christian noticed she was still wearing the locket.

Immanuel and Aimee had loved each other, and Immanuel had continued to love Aimee after she died. He loved her to this day. It made no sense; she left him. It might not have been her fault, nevertheless she had moved on, and he just kept on loving her. Dead, a ghost, of no utility or consequence. Yet his feelings never changed, never abated.

Christian didn't understand. When someone was gone, she was gone. And you can't confuse grief with love. They're two different feelings. You don't love someone because she died. Your love doesn't grow from grief, it must be the other way around.

He'd had early experience with grief, and no love ever came of it. He once had a girlfriend who later died in a car accident. On a superficial level, grief is pity. He and his girlfriend had long since broken up, but still he felt pity. He was sorry for her, sorry that she'd never touch, taste, see, smell, or hear again. He genuinely felt something. But it was just pity, it wasn't true grief, and it certainly wasn't love. He got over it.

He remembered his father leaving. It was right after a fight with his mother. He threw some things, kicked some furniture, slapped her a few times, and stormed out the door. Never to return. This time Christian felt grief at a deeper level. His father wouldn't play catch with him anymore, wouldn't take him to the carnival, or sneak beer from his own plastic cup into Christian's. He would no longer be the man of the house. In this instance the grief wasn't pity, it was loss. And it took a long time before that grief morphed into anger, where it belonged.

The deepest level of grief was one Christian hadn't yet experienced, but he knew he was about to. On the deepest level, grief is regret. You regret everything you didn't say or do, and should have. You regret everything you said or did, and shouldn't have. Christian knew instinctively that such grief would never pass. He would carry it the rest of his life.

If he hadn't come back, if he'd escaped the river on the *other* side, he wouldn't have been able to live with himself. Not from shame—he knew who he was—rather from grief.

He reached down and touched the locket around Violet's neck.

Her eyes fluttered open. She took him in immediately and smiled weakly.

"Have you seen our baby?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Isn't she beautiful?"

"I've never seen a more beautiful baby." As though he even knew what beauty was.

"I want to name her Aimee. Is that all right?"

"It's perfect, Sweetie."

She flinched in pain.

He held her in his arms. According to the universal blueprint, now was the time for her to go. She had named the baby. He would see that her wish was carried out. She had no further use for him, and would now leave him. That's what they did.

"What day is today?" she asked.

"Wednesday."

She closed her eyes and smiled. "Oh good, my favorite."

"Mine too," he said. It was a good day of the week to die.

How do you say goodbye to someone you love? What is the protocol? Go ahead, I'll catch up later. Don't take any wooden nickels.

A cellmate had once argued that love was just an intense form of like. It was merely the top end of affection, just as hate was at the bottom. There were no lines between Like and Love or between Dislike and Hate. It was a continuous scale, and the point where the terms changed was arbitrary, the whim of the speaker.

Christian didn't agree, or more accurately, no longer agreed. What he felt for Violet, as he watched her die, wasn't something that could be quantified, it couldn't be scaled. It wasn't something that could even be described. And it certainly wasn't something that would end when she died, or even when he himself passed on. It was, as the poets had been saying all along, the one thing that truly lasted forever.

The door flung open, and a man in a lab coat burst into the room. Following him were the midwife and what appeared to be a nurse, hauling a transparent bag. They crowded Christian out of the way and set up an IV pole.

The midwife hustled Christian out of the room.

"Into the hallway," she ordered. Then, more softly, "When God closes a door he opens a window. The river made an ambulance impossible, but a smooth, dry road would have ill suited the doctor's private motorboat."

Chapter Thirty-Three

After the storm had abated, after the waters had receded, Christian and Immanuel visited the bridge site together. The sun was setting, and the streets and sidewalks were littered with branches, loose leaves, and other debris. Clouds still roiled in the sky, but their fury was spent.

The bridge was in the same wrecked condition, the remaining planks and beams poking randomly above the river's surface, torrents of water flowing between them. The water swirled through the wreckage almost cheerfully, as though getting away with something naughty. The bridge had hardly reigned over the flow when it was intact; it enjoyed no pretense of doing so now.

The car was gone. There was no way it could have washed downstream; it was too heavy. Christian wondered if he'd imagined it. But no, the experience was too real to have been imagined. The car must have been towed.

"You sure it was a Bentley?" Immanuel asked

"There's no mistaking them. And here, of all places."

"Do you happen to know what kind of car Aimee died in?"

Christian shook his head.

Immanuel was silent for a moment. Finally he said, "It doesn't matter. Why did you come back?"

"I ran into someone on my way out, someone who convinced me to make a choice in favor of people other than myself. A choice to either hold on or let go, to either remain or depart. To live or die. I'm pretty sure the person was waiting for me."

Immanuel nodded gravely and muttered, "She does that sometimes."

Christian thought of his baby, waiting for him to assume the responsibilities of a father. He thought of the vines waiting for his care. The latter were there before him and the former would remain after he was gone. Now he understood the difference between an enclosed and a bounded space. The one was where you were, the other was where you lived. The one was a choice, the other was your village. A ghost had steered him home.

Christian turned to Immanuel and said, "If it's okay with you, I think I'd like to be a winemaker."

Immanuel wore the face he'd always worn when responding to openly declared career choices. The face that said he didn't care one way or another what anyone chose to do, how they chose to conduct their lives. The face that said it's *your* passion to embrace, not mine. It's *your* life.

He wore the face, then he dropped it, relaxed, and grinned.

"Be a good one," he said.

Something stirred near the riverbank. It was probably nothing more than a frog, or a fish splashing at water's edge. Maybe even just the breeze churning up a wave.

Immanuel approached the bank, and Christian followed him.

"Shh," Immanuel said, to whatever was stirring, to whomever might have been listening. "It's just me. I brought a friend."

★

Harvest day came. Claire and Gabi arrived to help. Claire's hair was down, in curls spilling over her shoulders. The top three buttons of her blouse were unbuttoned. Scandalous! She hugged Christian longer than necessary, then stared into his eyes with—dare he interpret?—respect.

Gabi was dressed conservatively, for a change, in long pants and sleeves and a bandana around her head. Christian hardly recognized her. She planted a sloppy kiss on his cheek and said, "So, have you found the happiness that was eluding you?"

"I have. Have you found your place in the world?"

"Not a chance. That's the beauty of it. I'll always be searching."

Immanuel rolled Violet and the baby out in a wheelchair and parked them in the grass.

"You're going to need the extra hands today," he told Christian. "We can't afford pickers this year."

"No, the two of you—the three of you—are sitting this one out."

"You can't do it alone," Violet said.

"I have your sisters to help me."

"But it'll take weeks to pick this crop with so few people, even with the vineyard in its decimated state."

"Sometimes you just have to do what you have to do."

He put on his gloves and stepped into one of the rows. Claire took the next row over, and Gabi the one after that. A few minutes of picking, and Christian was already sweating. He looked around at the sea of vines and realized his optimism had been over the top. There was no way he'd bring the crop in. It was going to be another hand-to-mouth year.

He was reaching for another bunch when something on the horizon caught his eye. He paused and squinted.

A string of figures. At first he couldn't make them out. As the figures came closer he recognized several as employees of the August Dessoir winery. Following them, as if giving in to majority rule, was August himself.

August made his way to Immanuel, who was sitting in the grass next to Violet's wheelchair. Immanuel rose, and they shook hands.

"We thought you could use some help," August said, shrugging.

Immanuel stared off across the vineyard, as though silently acknowledging a gift. He said, "I appreciate it, brother."

The crew fanned out and went to work. Before long someone shouted "Eimer!" Soon such calls rang up and down the rows. August's son Thomas chased after them with a hod.

One picker said, "Check that guy's bucket for rocks."

From somewhere down the rows: "Keep your hands in your own furrow!"

"Don't eat all the grapes before they go to press!"

"Eimer!"

A breeze gathered and rolled across the vines. Christian stood, faced the river, and whispered "Thank you." Then he resumed his crouched position, balanced his bucket on a slab of gray slate, and reached for another bunch of grapes.

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