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AMBROSE FOUNTAIN

by Brian Sieve

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Prologue

In darkness like coal, the sound of a heartbeat pounds. Slow, steady, an arrhythmia of night, of sleep, of sound. Thump thump. The darkness is perfect, disembodied, enveloping the world, and still too; a perfect stillness, except for the sound, which breaks with a trebled, ceaseless rhythm. Thump thump. Like a heartbeat. Thump thump. Then a trickle of light faintly illuminates the dark. The light falls into the abyss, a golden strand spreading out as it descends, illuminating the dark stone ventricles of the fountain. Walls so close that there is no room to move, no space for air, only the silence and the heartbeat and the claustrophobia of stone and air. Thump thump. The walls contract and release, contract and release. Rising now on a column of light, the sound amplifies, echoing up and down. Louder, soul-crushing thunderclaps. Thump thump. The sound floats up toward the light source. The stone walls constrict then dilate, an iris of darkness and pulsating rhythm. Thump thump. Until silence returns, and unfolds into miraculous daylight.

Part One: The Turning

CHAPTER I

THE TIMEWORN FOUNTAIN looked out of place on the property. Built out of stone, it sat in the middle of an imposing gazebo. The six pillars around its base supported a steepled canopy, which arched lifelessly above it. It looked like a monument that belonged in a cemetery, not the centerpiece of the recently renovated winery. Moss stains on the fountain wall gave it an eerie, green hue. It was converted from an old well and the water was drawn from the chasm, so that it appeared to be rising from deep within the earth like a geyser.

The fountain sat off to the side of the sprawling Victorian mansion that housed the winery. A final coat of paint dried on the exterior trim. Immaculately groomed lawns and gardens framed the house—towering trees, exotic flowers, freshly installed pavers, and landscape lights. A wide and newly sealed parking lot ran along the side of the house, giving way to a view of trellised vines stretching over acres of the sprawling vineyard. A visitor might easily have mistaken the place for a small hotel—a posh, wine country B&B with accompanying views of the valley. Behind the house meandered the picturesque rolling hills of California wine country.

Ceramic pots overflowing with bright flowers lined the driveway, which curled down toward the street. A wrought iron gate stood sentry over the estate. In the arch above it, ornate letters spelled out *Ambrose Fountain*.

In the vineyard, the remnants of a thick advection fog lingered, even as the September sun warmed the hillocks. The morning air

had turned chilly only in the last few days. Important decisions were being made up and down the valley, from Calistoga south to Napa. Hundred of vintners were scratching their heads and consulting their data, trying to determine that precise moment to harvest. Some had already started; others still waited to pull the grapes. It had been a hot, dry summer. If they made the right decisions, if they picked the grapes at precisely the right time, the harvest this year could produce one of those rare vintages, one of the classics which would fetch rave reviews and outlandish prices.

For the men and women who'd been doing this for years, the harvest was a time of cheerful energy. An urgent time to be sure, but one that was also full of hopeful, even robust, optimism. But for the newcomers—and every year there were always newcomers to the valley, people who'd made their money in stock markets or who'd cashed in on a lifetime of diligent labor and took a chance at winemaking—these first harvests were a nightmarish gamble at best.

The first year was always more guesswork than science. Far more wineries failed than succeeded. The veterans watched the startups come and go with detached bemusement. The Beringers and Charles Krugs and Far Nientes of the valley, wineries that had endured it all—Prohibition, the Great Depression, phylloxera droughts, and floods—showed little interest or sympathy for their struggling neighbors. Even a bust crop wouldn't faze the old guard. But for the new winemakers, often leveraged to the hilt with triple mortgages and small business loans and anxious investors, everything hinged on getting that first harvest right. It was to this group that Carter Harding belonged.

Carter rumbled from the barn in an old harvester. He looked comfortable, born for this work, like he'd been at it his whole life. Appearances, of course, could be deceiving.

Carter was a stunningly attractive man. Even as the first flecks of gray settled into his short hair, he retained his movie-star features. Strong jaw. Perfect smile. A thin, straight nose. His wife Kathleen always said that he looked like Paul Newman with brown eyes. For a decade, Carter had worked as a lawyer in Los Angeles. Despite his best efforts, he still looked like a lawyer most days, even when his flannel shirt was soaked through with sweat and the calluses on his hands cracked and bled.

Still, Carter felt alive doing this work. On the worst days, he would remember being stuck on the 405 Freeway, snuffing exhaust fumes from a flotilla of BMWs rushing along at three-and-a-half miles per hour. But at Ambrose Fountain, possibility waited inside the empty oak barrels. Soon those barrels would be filled; soon bottles would line the shelves of his winery; soon Carter would be able to erase the memory of corporate law practice.

On the other hand, Carter Harding couldn't escape the fact that, quite possibly, he'd bitten off more than he could chew. As the harvest approached, every decision he had to make felt like threading a needle with a piece of wet spaghetti. Sugar levels and acids and tannins. Should he press the grapes? Do a malolactic fermentation? How long should he barrel age the cabernet? How many seasonal workers should he hire? How much should he pay them? Where the fuck would he get the money for all this?

Carter had risked everything on Ambrose Fountain and he hadn't even made a single drop of wine yet. Christ, he hadn't even had a glass of wine in a month. He was floating on empty barrels filled with dreams.

A year ago, he'd sold the house in L.A., convinced his wife to move away from a lucrative photography business, and yanked his teenage daughter out of school and out of the arms of her boyfriend. Well, at least that part Carter felt good about. But the winery and the grapes and this first harvest had gone from being a romantic idea to a game of Russian roulette. Lately, all he could hope for was at least one empty chamber in the gun.

Almost on cue, Carter pressed the clutch and the harvester belched a huge cloud of black smoke, sputtered, and stalled.

He jumped from the tractor and walked around back. A black haze of oily smoke enveloped the machine. He stared at the harvester, into the harvester, as if he were looking straight through it. It was yet another setback in the endless string of setbacks that had become his life. He just needed to get the grapes in. If he could just do that, then there was the slimmest chance they'd make it through the year.

Through choking smoke, Carter thought how all this suddenly bore a great resemblance to the life of a homesteader a century earlier, staring at the face of a long, cold winter without food, wood, or a plan. Only for Carter Harding, he was desperately trying to make his first batch of wine without enough money to fix the

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tractor. And on top of that, Carter was hosting a party tonight for two hundred people, including the very people whose decisions could make or break his future. He grabbed a rag from his back pocket and loosened the oil cap. He cursed the old tractor.

CHAPTER II

KATHLEEN FRANTICALLY PREPARED an abundance of food. The kitchen looked like Thanksgiving dinner preparation on steroids. Every pot they owned was either in use or a casualty in the sink. A pot of water boiled over and hissed on the stove.

Carter walked up behind his wife and kissed her neck. He could smell garlic roasting in the oven and caramelized onions on the stove. Kathleen pulled away from him and dashed to the sink, dumping a pot of pasta into a colander. A wave of steam sprayed in front of her, dampening her face and fogging up her reading glasses. She turned and wiped the lenses with the cuff of her sleeve. Her long, dark hair shot off wildly in all directions, as though she'd electrocuted herself. Without make-up, with a greasy apron tied around her waist, and scratched glasses balancing on the tip of her nose, Carter thought his wife looked even more beautiful than usual.

"How's it coming?" he asked with a smile. Kathleen met his smile with a playful scowl.

"In high school I gave my entire home ec class food poisoning from grilled cheese sandwiches," she said. "I should be so lucky with gourmet appetizers for two hundred."

"Something about that apron," Carter said. "Those oven mitts. The peanut sauce smeared across your face. You look beautiful."

"I was going more for hot."

“So hot,” Carter whispered. He pulled her close, kissed her again, pressed his body against hers until the oven buzzed and Kathleen pushed him away to remove a tray. She wiggled her ass a little as she bent over the open oven, then turned and glanced back at him.

“Everything okay?” she asked. She lowered a tray of hot kebabs onto the only free space on the counter.

“Just opening night jitters,” he said. “We have to impress the right wine critics, out class the competition, beat the doubters.”

“Can’t we just beat the critics?” Kathleen smiled at him.

“To a bloody pulp.”

Carter reached around his wife’s hips and pulled her close. They stood together and swayed, the spicy smells of her Cajun catfish rising from the oven. She turned and faced him and they kissed hard. He pressed his body against her. He held the kiss, felt the first hint of arousal, and noticed how quickly the possibility of sex pushed his worry aside.

“Puke.”

Carter and Kathleen both released each other like teenagers caught on the basement couch, but the only teenager nearby was Lisa, their fifteen-year-old daughter who crossed the kitchen with a phone to her ear.

“No, nothing,” she said. “My parents are just copulating in the middle of our

kitchen. I’ll talk to you later.” She turned her back to her parents and lowered her voice. “I love you, too. Bye.”

Lisa belonged on television. In her slight frame, the qualities of innocence and sexiness waged a war for her soul. It was an unsteady and dangerous balance. She had her father’s dark hair and eyes, but her mother’s soft features and skin. Thin, strong, and confident like Carter, Lisa still dressed like a Los Angeles teenager. She hated wine country, and resented her father for dragging her away from the world she knew.

“Who was that?” Carter asked.

“Grandma,” Lisa said.

“Grandma’s been dead for three years,” Carter said.

“I thought she sounded strange.”

Carter opened the refrigerator and pulled out a block of cheese. He balanced it on the corner of a cutting board and tried to slice it without flipping the board off the counter.

“You have to quit spending so much time on the phone with Scott,” Carter said.

Both Lisa and Carter looked for Kathleen to arbitrate.

Kathleen wiped her hands on her apron. “You know how I feel. It’s been over a year and you need to move on.”

Lisa rolled her eyes and slipped the phone into the back pocket of her jeans. Carter pushed the cutting board half an inch back onto the counter and popped a wedge of cheese into his mouth.

“Cheese goes straight to your ass, Dad,” Lisa said.

“That why you’re refusing to come outside for the party tonight?” Carter asked. The cutting board wobbled on the ledge and Carter had to lift it again and look for somewhere else to put it. “Afraid there will be too much cheese?”

“No,” Lisa said. “Just too much kissing ass.”

Carter held the cutting board as his eyes scanned the room. There was not a single parcel of uncluttered space in the kitchen.

“It’s important to your mother and me,” he said, lowering the board on top of an overflowing pile of dirty dishes in the sink. Rather than helping him, Lisa just stared, somewhat bemused by his clumsiness.

“Kind of like it was important to drag me away from all my friends?” she shot back, “My school, the city I know, and the boy I love?”

“Exact same thing,” Carter said. “Be outside at eight.” Carter kissed her on the forehead and stuffed a piece of cheese between her lips. She closed her eyes and scrunched her nose like she had smelled a skunk.

CHAPTER III

AT LEAST THE WEATHER had cooperated; a warm breeze lifted the smell of grapes over the lawn, where the elegantly dressed guests sipped wine and sampled Kathleen's hors d'oeuvres. Three waiters floated among the crowd, replenishing food trays and drinks. A jazz trio strummed lightly on a makeshift stage near the parking lot.

Kathleen Harding looked more stunning than ever. She had scrubbed off the residue from the day's cooking and replaced her stained apron and quilted oven mitts with a long, shimmering black dress, which she'd worn once to a gallery opening in Brentwood. Christian Bale had flirted with her that night. But here in Napa, there were no movie stars, only people like Arch Cummings, an obnoxious, over-the-hill hipster wearing an evening coat, jeans, and \$400 eyeglasses.

Kathleen was pointing out the work that had been done to the house. Her finger swept across the front door to the fountain, which Carter had lit with white lights so it twinkled in the dark.

"According to legend," Kathleen said, "the famous outlaw James Ambrose often wrote of stopping by the fountain to throw a coin in for good luck. He believed it saved him from being caught."

"You re-named the vineyard after a criminal?" Arch asked. His voice rose into a nasally whine.

"After the fountain," Kathleen corrected him.

Arch crinkled his forehead. "It's a bit of an eyesore."

“It’s a part of history,” Kathleen said. She wanted to escape, but smiled brightly and pretended to enjoy his company. Kathleen always kept a reserve supply of charm for people like Arch.

“Speaking of history,” Arch said. “Do you ever get the heebie jeebies living in this house?”

Kathleen turned from the fountain back to Arch. He was tall, at least six five, and rail thin. She was used to artists and wannabe artists. You had to push back all the time or they figured they were smarter than you were.

“This body doesn’t have one superstitious bone in it,” Kathleen said with a sly, playful smile. Arch ogled her, practically salivating. “That being said, the first thing we did was have all the gas pipes completely replaced.”

“Well, you and Carter certainly are the talk of the wine community.

Everyone wants to know if you’ll finally tarnish Richard Fremont’s reputation.”

“As a wine critic, that’s your call,” Kathleen said. “But let’s just say we’ve spent the last year cultivating our own unique touch.”

She squeezed Arch’s shoulder and he giggled like a twelve-year-old with a Playboy.

Kathleen noticed Carter in the courtyard, watching her with a smile as he chatted up as many guests as he could. “Duty calls. Try some of the hummus if you get a chance.”

Against every instinct, she reached in and gave Arch a quick hug. He smelled like baby powder and grapefruit, but he mattered now, and Kathleen understood about charming the people that mattered.

She glided through the crowd, smiling, waving at strangers like they were old friends. She’d been up since four prepping, and she hadn’t stopped moving once. But the thrill of so many guests and the warm evening air and sound of the jazz music revived her some. What she was most, at that moment, was hungry. She needed food, something substantive, fried chicken or a chunk of steak, not the gourmet finger food she’d spent all day preparing. She settled for a handful of olives and a skewer of chicken satay.

Carter was stuck talking to a couple that looked like they fell out of a J. Crew catalog. He signaled for Kathleen’s aid with his eyes and a wry grin.

“We haven’t seen you at church yet,” the woman said as Kathleen joined them. She hadn’t met this couple before, but instantly she hated the woman. They were the perfect Stepford couple.

“You know,” Carter said, “church really isn’t our thing.”

“Ours either,” Mr. Stepford said. “But a few of the more conservative wine critics and distribution reps? Definitely their thing. Couldn’t hurt, you know?”

Carter forced a smile in his wife’s direction. “Famous last words,” he said. “If you’ll excuse us.”

Kathleen smiled at the couple and took Carter’s hand in hers. They found a quiet space in the crowd.

“How did it go?”

“I can handle Arch Cummings,” Kathleen said. “But we might have to change the name from Ambrose Fountain to Ambrose Whorehouse.”

“This is working,” Carter said without humor. “Everything is perfect.”

“I told you not to worry. Now, who’s next?”

With an irresistible grin, Carter pulled her in and kissed her. When he let go, they wandered together back into the fray. Carter raised his wine glass to various guests. He smiled at others, nodded, glad-handed all within reach. More politicians than vintners that night, Carter and Kathleen tried to take stock of how best to spend their energy and time. Carter went left, Kathleen right: best to divide and conquer.

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After a while, Carter spotted Kathleen again, hugging Owen St. Claire in their driveway. Even from a distance, Owen looked distinguished, important, casually indifferent to the whole scene. They were neighbors and friends, but Owen knew things that Carter was still only guessing at. Carter politely nodded at a few people and promised to be back in a second. He placed his wine glass on a tabletop and made a beeline for the driveway, for Kathleen and the St. Claires.

Carter waved his hand as he approached Owen and his wife, Elizabeth. Their teenage son, Brandon, trailed behind them. Kathleen was kissing Elizabeth on the cheek.

“You guys live next door,” Carter said, extending his hand. “How can it possibly take you this long to get here?”

“Next door is a mile away,” Owen said, nodding towards his wife. “And Elizabeth had to redo her makeup.”

“That’s not true,” Elizabeth said, smiling, reaching out to hug Carter.

“Twice,” Owen said, rolling his eyes.

The pleasantries didn’t last long, however. Carter looked up and saw Lisa stumbling toward them with a half-empty glass of white wine in her hand. He turned from the St. Claires and reached for his daughter’s arm.

“Easy, Tiger,” Lisa said, trying to sound grown up. “If you want a drink, just ask.”

Carter had tried to keep an open mind about his daughter drinking. After all, this was their life’s work now. It would be unreasonable to expect her not to sample the wares. But she was testing him, and Carter didn’t want or need a scene. Not tonight.

“How many glasses?” Carter asked quietly as Kathleen continued to make small talk with their neighbors.

“Lost count,” Lisa slurred. “I can pay the six-dollar tasting fee if you’re worried about the money.”

Carter felt a wave of anger rise in his chest. For a moment, he considered knocking the glass out of his daughter’s hand and taking her over his knee.

“Lisa, do you remember Owen and Elizabeth’s son, Brandon?” Kathleen said, trying to redirect. “He’s home from boarding school for the weekend.”

The teenagers made reluctant eye contact.

“Where do you go to school again?” Brandon asked Lisa.

“I go to public school,” she said, a sharp edge returning to her voice. “It’s this thing they have for kids who don’t need to learn the complicated math procedures of balancing a trust fund.”

Carter changed his fantasy. Rather than spanking his daughter, he quickly imagined throwing himself down the fountain well.

“Lisa was just on her way to bed,” Carter managed to say. “Weren’t you, Lisa?”

Without missing a beat, Lisa stared at Brandon. “Do you want to come?”

Brandon St. Claire shuffled awkwardly, then said, “I don’t think that would be appropriate.”

“I wasn’t talking to you,” Lisa said, raising her eyes toward Owen.

Kathleen grabbed her daughter’s arm and guided her away from the group. Owen and Brandon both looked stunned, but Elizabeth forced a smile and took her son’s arm, leading him off in the opposite direction.

“Sorry about that,” Carter said.

Owen gathered himself and forced a smile. He put his hand on Carter’s shoulder and they drifted back toward the party.

“Dick Fremont would be proud of you,” Owen said. “Your courtyard is a who’s who of Napa Valley. Is that the mayor?”

“You started harvesting today?” Carter asked.

“End of the week, probably. Fix your sprinkler system yet?”

Carter shook his head. “Harvester broke down during my test run.”

“You’ve got to be kidding,” Owen said.

“One thing after another.”

“You going to be okay?”

Carter stopped a moment. They had drifted over to the fountain. It was lit by twinkling white lights. Carter leaned his back against the gazebo.

“A little luck wouldn’t hurt.”

Owen grabbed a glass of wine from a passing waiter and took a long sip. Carter admired his friend’s experience, his ability to cut through all the bullshit. But Owen also had an air about him, a certain swagger that made Carter a bit uneasy.

“Ran into Matt Roseman today,” Owen said. “You’ve signed on the dotted line with Alto Vino, right?”

“Tomorrow,” Carter said. He felt his pulse rush a little. “Why? What did he say?”

“Relax. You’re about to make a deal with the most prestigious wine distributor in the nation.”

Owen placed his wine glass on the gazebo and reached into his pocket. He pulled out a quarter and held it aloft a moment. They both seemed to consider the coin before Owen handed it to Carter. Owen nodded toward the fountain.

“Toss it in,” he said. “You said you could use some good luck.”

Carter laughed. “You serious?”

“Sure. Why not?”

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Carter didn't want to rest his hopes on luck or chance, but he flipped the coin, anyway. It rose in the air, hovered, and fell into the fountain well. Carter waited for the splash, forgetting about the well's depth. A long second, then another, passed without a sound. Then a tiny plink echoed up.

A split second later, another sound rose from the well. It was strange, almost eerie and alive. It sounded like a release of air from the depths of the fountain, almost as if it was exhaling. Carter's eyes narrowed.

"Something wrong?" Owen asked.

"What? No. How about a drink?"

Owen lifted his wine glass in front of Carter's face then turned back toward the party. As they walked together, Carter turned and looked back at the fountain.

CHAPTER IV

INSIDE LISA'S BEDROOM, the decor was decidedly Kathleen's doing. Lacy curtains. A canopy bed. Still, Lisa had managed to add her own touch with posters of The Dead Kennedys and The Cramps.

The light was still on when Carter entered. He gently pulled a blanket over his sleeping daughter's shoulders. He turned to walk away, but just before he hit the light switch, her eyes opened.

"Are you mad?" she asked, sounding every bit his little girl again, albeit a slightly intoxicated, slightly exhausted version.

Carter turned back.

"I don't understand why you do these things."

"I just," Lisa started. "I hate it here. We're all alone. It's too quiet. I miss the city and I thought it would get better but..."

As quickly as she'd appeared, his little girl was gone. He remembered the boyfriend, the tedious fights, the compromising positions he tried to avoid seeing.

"Scott's eighteen," Carter said. "He's too old for you. Sooner or later you have to—"

"I know," Lisa said. "But easier said than done."

Carter's anger quickly gave way. He moved back toward her and sat on her bed. He stroked his daughter's hair.

"That first one seems like he'll be the only one," he said. "I remember."

Lisa pulled herself up a bit and glanced around her room. She inched closer to him and Carter felt her tension give way. For a moment, it felt like she was a little girl again.

“I know this is a great house and everything, but,” she said. “I never feel comfortable here. I mean, that girl died in my bedroom.”

Carter smiled.

“Rumor has it she haunts whoever doesn’t keep her old room clean.”

He elbowed his daughter lightly in the ribs.

“It creeps me out, Dad.” She pulled the covers over her shoulders and turned away from her father.

“A house is a house, Leese.”

“And this is a house that leaked enough gas fumes to kill an entire family in their sleep.”

Carter sighed and glanced out the window. “I miss this.”

“You miss arguing?”

“Talking,” he said. “Sometimes I wish certain things could go back to the way they were, too. You know?”

He leaned over and kissed his daughter on the forehead, and then pulled the blanket up. He moved away from her bed and hit the lights.

“I’m sorry, Dad,” Lisa said.

Carter smiled in the dark. “See you in the morning.”

Before Carter closed the door, he caught a glimpse of Lisa pulling the cover up over her head.

Crickets chirped through the still-open screen windows. Carter and Kathleen were asleep in bed. A crisp wind lifted the shades and pushed the blades on a ceiling fan one-quarter turn.

A creaking noise from the hallway shook Carter awake. His eyes popped open. Nothing. He sat up in bed and listened. A moment passed before he heard it again.

Creaking.

It was coming from outside the bedroom. That was certain. Carter thought a moment about waking Kathleen, then he quietly slipped out of bed. He made his way through the pitch-black hallway and listened.

Silence. Then, the creaking sound again. It was closer this time. Carter froze in place.

“Who’s there?”

Complete silence. Carter stepped into a patch of light coming through the windows, leaving the darkness behind him. Ten feet in front of him was another hallway that stretched over the east wing of the old house. It was immersed in darkness. Carter waited, his breath coming in short bursts. Nothing. Not a sound, not even crickets.

Then, something moved in the shadows. Someone was approaching him. Carter braced.

“Lisa?”

Definitely not. His mind raced. Broad shoulders became discernible. Carter clenched his fists. It was a man, coming down the east hallway.

The figure stopped at the edge of the darkest area. Then nothing moved. Silence again. Carter stood in a patch of ghostly light, straining to see into the shadows. Stillness.

Then a quick brush of movement. Carter could almost see a face.

“Carter.” The word came from behind him, distorted, choking on something. He spun around, turning his back to the darkness. There was no one in front of him, no one who could have called his name, just an empty hallway extending down the other side of the house. Then, at his back, a hand exploded out of the darkness and grabbed his neck.

Carter bolted up in bed, drenched in sweat. He couldn’t catch his breath. He reached out for his wife, to Kathleen’s side of the bed, when he heard it begin again. The same, distorted gurgling voice, horrible, calling out from the other side of the bed, saying his name.

“Carter?”

His head turned sharply to where Kathleen should be, but it was too dark. He felt himself tumble toward the outline of a human form. That strange, yet familiar sound. What was it? It took a moment for Carter to remember the eerie sound of the fountain exhaling. It roared around him, in his ears, in his teeth, in his soul. The sound rose from below the bed and began to fill the room, to fill the spaces inside Carter. Then, suddenly, light.

“Carter? What’s wrong?”

She formed slowly, Kathleen, her face, her body, her voice. Carter let out a laugh, trying to catch his breath. A dream, he

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thought. Just a dream. Kathleen wiped a trail of sweat from his forehead while his heartbeat slowed.

CHAPTER V

DIM RED LIGHT ILLUMINATED the small bedroom that Kathleen had spent the better part of June and July transforming into a dark room. She lifted a photo of Carter working in the vineyard from a tray of developing fluid and pinned it to a line. She pulled down several dry photos, stepped through a black curtain, ensured it was snug behind her, then headed out the door.

In her workshop, Kathleen placed her newly developed photos in front of empty frames. Some were worth keeping, others worth tossing in the trash. Yellow light cast through the windows. The autumn day was warm and bright, a Los Angeles day, Kathleen thought. Best to forget, she told herself.

On the table, a portfolio peeked out from under a pile of fanned out art magazines. Kathleen grabbed the portfolio, flipped through its pages: catalogue spreads, interior design layouts, and in the back, a cover of *Vogue* magazine. For years this had been her work, her passion, and in many ways, her life.

She sighed. “Kathleen Harding,” she said aloud. “You, my dear, were a damn good photographer.”

As if on cue, the doorbell chimed. Kathleen quickly closed her portfolio and headed out of the room.

She wasn’t halfway down the stairs when she spied Carter already opening the door and a man entering their foyer.

“Matt!” Carter said with a broad smile.

Matt Roseman was handsome, well-dressed, the kind of man Kathleen might have been attracted to before all this. She crouched

on the stairs, admiring his custom made suit, his Allen Edmonds McAllister leather shoes. Matt extended his hand and Carter reciprocated.

“Carter, how are you?”

“Fine,” Carter said. “Come on in.”

Matt took a quick glimpse around their living room and then came back to Carter. “Why don’t we walk and talk?”

“You don’t want to get the paperwork out of the way first?”

Matt patted Carter’s shoulder and turned back out the door. “Plenty of time for that. Come on.”

Crouching on the stairs, Kathleen watched with a sinking feeling as Carter stepped through the door and closed it behind him. A part of her wanted to return to her portfolio, but she knew that she wouldn’t be able to think about anything until Carter came back and told her the news. Matt Roseman, as much as anyone in the valley, held the keys to the Hardings’ success—hell, to their very survival.

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Carter and Matt walked through trellised vines. Matt had been telling a story about the legendary Helen Turley and a crop of her pinot that had softened and turned sour in a week. He said it happened sometimes, even in the midst of a great year. Some grapes make it, Matt seemed to be saying, and some don’t. He examined Carter’s grapes with a serious face.

“I have to be honest,” Matt said. “Your vines don’t look so good.”

“What do you mean?” Carter asked. He looked at the leaves, at the abundant fruit reddening on the vine.

“I mean,” Matt said, “they don’t look so good.”

Carter felt a wave of anger break over his chest. “Their progress is right on track.”

“Adequate,” Matt said, pulling a few grapes from their stems. “Maybe.”

Carter abruptly stopped. If he had a limit, he’d just run smack into it. “What are you saying?”

Matt dropped the cluster of grapes and dry-washed his hands, as if the stench of the grapes somehow infected his skin.

“I just don’t know if Alto Vino and Ambrose Fountain make the best match right now.”

Carter shook his head. “They were the perfect match three weeks ago.”

Matt walked a few paces ahead, down a row of grape vines held up by wires. Carter recognized that they had just stepped into a patch of grafted, old-vine zins. Suddenly, all of his grapes looked anemic, pasty. How could it have changed so fast?

“This vineyard’s history,” Matt said, smiling and sweeping his hand across the vines, “its reputation for success, is legendary. Honestly, it’s the reason you were even considered. But from the looks of things I think we may have jumped the gun.”

“We had an agreement,” Carter said, fighting back a growing rage.

“Well, it’s not like we put pen to paper.”

Carter shook his head. “You told me we had a deal.”

“Carter, I’m not saying another type of distributor won’t be interested.”

“Another type?” Carter was almost shouting.

Matt turned his back to Carter and began to walk back toward the house. Carter had no choice but to follow. He noticed how carefully Matt stepped, so that his shoes remained unsoiled despite being out in the vineyards. Carter realized that Matt wasn’t a winemaker, but a shark, the kind of person Carter had spent a decade swimming with in L.A. The very kind of person Carter had fled. Maybe there was no escaping, he thought. Maybe Napa Valley is just a rural, intoxicating version of what he’d left behind. Maybe corporate law and wine making weren’t all that different.

“It might not be as lucrative,” Matt said, not even bothering to turn back and face Carter. “But Alto Vino’s reputation hinges on the quality of its product. You won’t find our wines in a grocery store and that’s why clients trust our name.”

“I told the other distributors I wasn’t interested,” Carter said. He hated the sound of his voice. Pleading. He was fucking pleading.

“This sort of thing happens all the time,” Matt said. He turned around and flashed Carter a smile. “I’m not trying to burn a bridge here. Maybe next year we’ll be interested and you can tell us to go to hell.”

“I’m prepared to do that right now,” Carter said. He held back a growing urge to throw a right cross into Matt’s jaw.

Matt’s smile grew wider. They were all the way back at the parking lot, in front of Matt’s four-wheel drive SUV. Matt nodded like an attorney making a superfluous counter-offer for a case he’d already settled. He grabbed Carter by the shoulder and looked him in the eye with a plastic sincerity, as if *Alto Vino*’s decision was just as painful for him as it was for Carter. Carter knew the grab. Knew the look. Knew the lie.

“What do I have to do?” Carter asked.

“I’m sorry?” Matt said, genuinely nonplussed.

“I’ll do whatever I need to do,” Carter said. Matt released his grip on Carter’s shoulder. “Just help me out here, okay?”

Matt stepped back. Carter realized how desperate he must’ve sounded. Never show weakness. Never show fear. Had he forgotten everything he’d learned as a lawyer?

“Give me a call next year,” Matt said. He smiled, but less warmly and with more caution as though he was standing outside a crime scene. A smile that said, it’s going to be okay, but it’s a mess right now.

Matt pulled out a key fob from his jeans and his car beeped. Without even a handshake, Matt Roseman closed the door and drove away. Carter stood there, alone, watching the dust cloud from Matt’s tires drift into the air. Then he turned and re-entered a maze of grapes. Devastated. This was the worst possible news.

CHAPTER VI

KATHLEEN FELT BUOYANT that morning. A good night's sleep, the satisfaction of the party being behind them, the harvest, the September sky, the smell of oak barrels, all of it added a sort of gravity-defying bounce to her step. She straightened the framed family pictures in the hallway—Lisa in Malibu, on the Ferris wheel at Santa Monica, on Carter's shoulders along the rails of the Queen Mary in Long Beach Harbor. They weren't the best times, but then again, they weren't the worst either. Those were the days before they realized how much they wanted out. At least how much Carter wanted out. Ignorance is bliss, or some such wisdom, Kathleen thought. She looked at her daughter's pouting face, backlit by Pacific sunsets, and smiled.

She moved slowly down the hallway, filled with wispy dreams of the future, and happy memories of the past. A state of reverence, almost, a state of harmony, until she caught the sound of her husband's voice from his office.

"No, I understand," Carter said.

Kathleen always knew whom he was talking to by the pitch of his voice, by the subtle shifts in his cadence. This one had to be a business call, and the news sounded grim.

"I'm just waiting for the advance from *Alto Vino*."

Kathleen stopped at the edge of her husband's office door. In the mirrored glass of a framed photograph, she saw his reflection pacing across the room.