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For the Love of Nouveau

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FOR THE LOVE OF NOUVEAU

By

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To my mother, my strength.
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ABSTRACT

_For the Love of Nouveau_, is a novel based in upstate New York where Robert LeBarge, a twenty-something aspiring vintner in New York who was raised on vineyard, moves to the Hudson River Valley two hours north of Manhattan to start vineyard with his new wife, Emily. From their, the novel begins to allude to sexual tension between Emily and Robert that is based on Sexual abuse Emily received before they met. It is contrasted by the mysterious divorce of Robert’s father and mother, who split without explanation one year before Robert’s marriage.

Robert knows of Emily’s history and falls in love with the idea of helping her through her past. He is corrupted by the knowledge of her history, confused by his place in it, and battling with what it all means.

Robert met Emily three years before when he thought he wanted to be a sommelier and attended related courses at the Culinary Institute in Hyde Park, New York and wine specific courses at various schools in Manhattan. Early on in their relationship, they find that they believe that they are perfect for each other, one patient, companionate, and understanding, the other filled with passion and suppressed sensuality. As backstory, this grows into love, marriage, and a life together in Kingstown, New York, with twenty acres with Merlot and Chardonnay vines that overlook the Hudson River to the east.

Robert becomes a voice expressing the difficulties that men face when loving women with pasts that include sexual abuse. Robert’s perspective introduces feelings of social impotence, confusion, and discomfort toward Emily, the woman he loves but cannot protect from her past.

The story revolves around Robert and Emily living an overly romantic life at first, thinking they are meant to be together, then coming to the realization that people fall in love with each other at certain key points in their lives and that not only the people, but their hearts can become inconstant. Though Robert felt being a part of Emily’s life
through her trauma was what made him whole, when she fully healed and revealed her new self, the understanding that they may not be as right for each other as previously thought comes to fruition.
CHAPTER 1
THE FIRST FROST

When Robert was nine the glass rattled in the old wooden window frame and
roused him. He watched the darkness sever the beams of white light as they slipped in
and along the windowsill before they disappeared. Alone in his room, he felt the
reverberations rise and fall outside like swarms of bees blinded in the night. “Robbie.”
The room was in darkness; his father’s silhouette blocked the dim light coming through
the doorway. The faint thunder stirred and shuddered outside the window. “Outside.
Now.” The silhouette was gone and Robert rolled out of bed, bare feet thumping on the
cold hardwood floor, and ran over to the window. He couldn’t see beyond the first rows
of grapevines that grew closest to the house. Beyond them, he knew the land dropped
away and eventually fell into Seneca Lake, but the darkness drew the sky and the ground
together, as emptiness.

He struggled to slip on his blue shell, stuffed his mittens in his pockets, and ran
through the house to the front door. Outside, the thunder subsided, and when he stepped
out on the porch, there was only silence. It was colder than it had been all fall and Robert
had heard his father and mother talk about the consequences of the cold on their vineyard.
His cotton pajamas rustled with the wind but felt only like the breeze itself slipping along
the backs of his knees. He was nine years old. The light above the front door shone
down the driveway and Robert walked quietly until he reached the gravel. He listened
for the sound of his father or his mother anywhere ahead of him. He heard nothing. His
pants felt like tissue paper and the wind cut through them effortlessly.

Behind the house, the thunder rose again until it was all Robert could hear. He
ran along the lawn east, toward the lake, and looked behind the house. The rumbling
grew quickly until it was thumping and pounding above him firing the wind and the
leaves around him in a spout of dust. He covered his ears from the noise and the cold. The wind tore into his face and hands. It traced along his skin like shards of glass.

His pants flapped viciously against his legs, the dead leaves around him and around the house began to collect and move in waves and spirals toward and away from the house, toward and away from him. A bright white light illuminated the vines from low in the sky, the thunderous wind shaking the branches and shoots and trellises of the vines beneath. Then the light hooked in the sky and shot past Robert toward the vineyard to the north. As the brilliant light fell away down the hill, Robert saw the tail end of the helicopter strafe along rows of vines across the valley, rows that belonged to someone other than his father. The light rose and fell, tracing the ridge to the north over acres of vines before slipping over the next valley and into darkness.

Then it was silent again and Robert sprinted to the front of the house and called out to his father. His boots crunched over grass stiff with frost. He ran down the winding gravel driveway past the low aisles of vines and down to the small collection of rose bushes his mother had been growing in a patch of grass among the vines. His father’s voice hollered from beyond the small pond. Then it was quiet. Robert ran toward the last row of vines along the edge of the pond. When he reached the far side, the unblemished reflection of the house glowed on the water. Its velvet shine spread out like a blanket of darkness among the vines mirroring the emptiness of the sky. He wiped his nose with his hand but felt the cold like open cuts along the insides of his nose and quickly pulled his hand away. He breathed deep and sneezed but kept running to find his father. He knew his mother was out in the darkness somewhere too, maybe with his father, maybe on a different part of the property, but standing somewhere among the rows watching for the helicopter.

At the end of the row, Robert saw his father standing over a small rose bush at the edge of the property. He looked north, up the hill past the house, to where the helicopter had disappeared. “The frost, Robbie,” he said, quietly, as though understanding something haunting and inevitable. “We’ve waited too long.” He held something large in his hand, some kind of torch or pole, but Robert couldn’t see it in the dark. He looked at his father and said nothing. The thunder of the helicopter tore through the sky and the white and red lights shot past them as they stood. “They’re making a mistake.” He
pointed at the helicopter. “They think we’re part of the Woodbury Vineyard.” He let out a deep resounding laugh and leaned back looking up at the stars. The lights and screaming engine tore across the hill and up over the house. Robert watched his father, whose lips curled obsessively into his tight cheeks. The thunder subsided beyond the house and the air was calm again.

Robert’s father stood quietly for a long time, squinting into the darkness to the north. His body began to slouch in the frigid breeze before he turned slowly to his son.

“Shit,” he said. “I spoke too soon.” He pointed east across the lake, where the red and white lights moved in silence along the lakefront.

“I don’t understand, Dad,” Robert said, quietly. His father’s excitement and rough laughter had scared him.

“They have the money, Robbie, the money to keep their grapes from freezing.” He talked to Robert as though he was older and would understand. His voice had become flat and ineffectual. “They pay for a helicopter to stop the frost, to turn up the air and keep the temperature high enough to save the grapes. All they have to do is fly over our property a little, stir up the air, raise the temperature, and keep us in the game.” His head dropped. “But why would they when we’re the competition? Why would they?” He was talking softly, to himself. Robert put his hands in the pockets of his jacket and rolled his mittens around with his fingers. He breathed heavily and felt warm from running and the wind on his legs cooled him. “That pilot thought we were a part of Woodbury. He was going to fly around our property and save our grapes but he realized his mistake too soon.”

“What does it mean, Dad?” Robert asked. His father toyed with one of the dead roses left on the bush in front of him. The petals had turned brown and crisp and crumbled between his fingers.

“It means we get nothing,” his father said. “A bad year. Probably just some bad wine.”

Robert had never listened to his parents’ worried conversations. It wasn’t in him yet to care beyond his own happiness. These things didn’t happen to him. He had been surrounded by their talk of vineyards his whole life, but it always seemed simpler than this. They waited, trimmed, pruned, replanted, waited more, and then harvested. That
was all Robert knew, that and the waiting for the grapes to turn to wine in the warehouse at the bottom of the hill to the southeast. He thought frost was an empty threat, something like growing up, something that if you ignored it, it didn’t happen. It was the frost that would kill the grapes. His father had waited until the last minute to harvest, taking the chance that frost might come and ruin the vintage, knowing that if the frost came, he didn’t have the money or the means to protect the grapes. The other surrounding vineyards were older, larger, and had more money to keep the frost away, even if just for a night.

Robert’s father had always told him that waiting meant better wine, a better vintage, a better life for all of them. He had told him that a longer season meant more minerals and character in the grapes, more sugar, and therefore better wine. Robert listened but didn’t understand. It didn’t seem to matter if the grapes were picked one day or the next. Wine all tasted the same to him. He never understood why his parents always waited and gambled when they worked all year to make something good. It didn’t make sense that they wanted to make something great or nothing at all. Even his nine year old logic told him that.

His father squinted to the north and raised his hand to block the light on the house that glowed in the distance. His black hair fluttered and flopped in the wind in rhythm with his flannel coat. Robert wondered if it was really his father’s fault and the waiting that had ruined the harvest. If they had picked the grapes that morning, they would have followed the narrow-track tractor along the rows, dumped the bunches of grapes into the crusher, and the juice would be in the warehouse where it would sit for some months in casks and steel towers. That waiting was the good waiting, he thought. The last few days of waiting had been stressful and draining on his parents. But all their patience had now failed them, and had allowed the frost to destroy the grapes around them in the darkness.

Robert heard footsteps along the frosted ground by the pond along the path. His mother appeared from the vines, her small frame masked by her large down coat. Her hood was pulled tight around her face framing it in short, white fur. She walked slowly, as though admiring the pond, the vines, and the rose bushes. She stood before Robert and his father, then turned and faced north with them. The lights of the helicopter moved along the other side of the valley, beyond Seneca Lake, where older, more prestigious
vineyards tiered along the hills. The red and white lights from the helicopter rose and fell, tracing the pitch of the hills along the lake, combing the hills of the Finger Lakes, keeping the frost from taking hold of the valleys. Robert felt cold again and stepped behind his father to shield himself from the wind. His mother stood motionless, her back to them.

“Do you think they’re shot?” she asked. She didn’t turn around to look at them.

“I don’t know,” Robert’s father said. He stepped closer to her from behind.

“We’ll have to wait and see, pick them tomorrow and hope for the best.”

“This is too much,” she said.

“I know. I’m sorry. We should have picked them today.”

“How many times can we do this?” she asked.

The wind howled and whistled and Robert’s father’s voice was lost. Robert heard his parents’ voices breaking though the wails of the wind but they reached him as inarticulate mumbles. His mother’s face contorted in an almost painful coldness, her narrow lips barely moving, her eyes lost in the distance beyond her husband.

Over the past week, Robert’s father had told him that their patience was being tested. The previous Sunday, as they walked along the driveway at dawn, Robert’s father talked softly to him as he did every time they walked the property together. “Our lives are bound by patience,” he said. “It’s what has allowed our family to persevere in all aspects of our lives.” He said it was in the LeBarge blood to be patient in all things, because in the end the bitterness and uncertainty create a truth that would have never been known without the wait, without the struggle to be patient. He said his truth was his wine, and that such patience was how all great things were created. But now, standing behind his mother and father in the vineyard with the vines and the pond and the house all beyond them in the night, Robert watched his father’s fruit slowly wilt from the frost while the helicopter’s swarming echo hummed in the distance.
He woke to the salty air blowing in from the Tyrrhenian Sea. He was lying next to her, both naked and entangled in the cascade of cotton sheets the color of brushed leather. In a moment before clarity, he stumbled with how he could awake in a room so foreign to him, textured stucco walls, shutters wide open, gulls calling over the crashing of waves. It was early but the sun danced along the tile floor shining like pearl. He wanted to hold on to this moment of confusion. It felt like a perfectly euphoric blur, too exotic for him to ask questions, but he woke almost completely before he could understand why.

He remembered it all in a flash. Northern Italy was his idea. It wasn’t hard to convince Emily. It was a honeymoon and a business trip for them both. The year after his mother had left his father, he married Emily, and now they lay in Italy, lazy and content. For him, Italy was conferences in Florence regarding terroir, the collective climate that creates uniqueness in wine. He wanted to taste the Super Tuscans, new wines from the region worth more than he could ever pay for a bottle. For Emily, it was Northern Italian cooking. She wanted to taste the freshness she heard so much about the years before at the Culinary Institute, the subtle differences in dishes from one town to the next, the secrets grandmothers and mothers kept among their families. Emily believed that she could taste their secrets and take them home with her. These were all excuses to honeymoon for three weeks, bouncing from hotel to hostel, bed and breakfast to beachside villa.

It had been only their third night together there, arriving in Rome, renting an economy Renault, and following the western coast up through the state of Latium and into Tuscany, stopping whenever they felt the urge. They stopped in small towns along the way and took back-roads up through the hills. They looked for shops that didn’t cater to tourists. Emily searched the small markets for something remarkable to remember the
area by, but everything seemed mass marketed and prefabricated to be sold to the tourists that rented cars and drove along the coast. She had laughed out loud when she saw some of the items were made in China. Robert had not been surprised but acted appalled and pretended to make a scene, throwing his hands up and talking loudly about how unauthentic the whole trip was before pulling Emily back to the car quickly and leaving the vendors confused.

They had left for Italy the day after they had married in New York. It was a quaint service in a church in a small town north of New York City, where Emily had gone to a wedding once when she was a child. She told Robert it was her first wedding and that she had returned to that church when she was older, deciding it was where she wanted to marry. The small stone chapel sat surrounded by a young orchard of crabapples and a derelict stone wall.

Robert’s mother phoned days before and said she could not attend because of her health and because she didn’t have the money. The wedding date landed almost exactly a year after she had left. Robert offered to pay for her ticket, but she insisted she couldn’t fly because she was too weak. Emily’s friends and family drove up from Brooklyn and filled more than half the chapel. The leaves of the trees had turned brown and red then and Emily’s guests spoke of the beautiful drive up along the Hudson River. Robert’s father presided as his best man. Next to him on the altar stood Robert’s friend, Seth, whom he had met in Manhattan taking sommelier’s courses. Robert’s father had stood and toasted to their happiness at the reception with a shaky voice. Then Robert and Emily disappeared from the party and told everyone they’d be back in three weeks.

Now, three days later, Robert slid off the bed and walked along the cool tile floor to the window. He was still naked but didn’t care to cover himself. He felt too good to care if people saw him naked, standing in the window looking out at the coast. Below, the shoreline broke from dark jagged rocks into a public beach, where families were erecting stripped sun umbrellas and laying down blankets in their shade. Two small children ran into the delicate surf over and over again, merging with the white water, mouths open in laughter. The water was almost iridescent in the early sun, glowing bright beyond the breaking waves. Robert turned and watched Emily. She was far on her side of the bed and sprawled out almost naturally, her right breast exposed above the
sheets, red from sunbathing topless the day before, light freckles, brought out by the sun, showing on her cheeks. Robert sat in a wooden chair next to the small end-table underneath the window and watched her arm that lay across her stomach rise and fall as she breathed.

He remembered how they had tried to make love in the room the night before and couldn’t. They tried to go slowly but Emily tensed up before they even began. He raised himself above her slowly and kissed her neck. In the moment before he moved into her, he felt her body shaking slightly. He slid his hips up to meet hers and she unconsciously gripped his arms tightly, digging her nails into his triceps. Then she pushed him up and away from her chest. Robert fell to her side on the bed.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I’m still not ready.” Robert wrapped his arms around her and told her that it didn’t matter. That it was good enough to be with her anyway and that they would work it out. It worried him that she tensed up so much every time they tried to make love. He wanted to make love to her, but not in a way that hurt her, no matter how bad he wanted her.

They hadn’t made love yet at all. Even just before the marriage they had tried, and she reacted the same, some part of her pushing him away, either mentally or physically. He knew it was her past, she had told him that. She had told him of the rape, the assault by someone she knew, and it made him sick. She called it date-rape when she told him, but that didn’t matter to him. He didn’t differentiate between the two, believing that anything remotely close was rape.

A brief picture flashed through his mind of the faceless man, but he didn’t want to think about it now. Not while he was here with her beginning a new life. He wanted to think about how to make her feel good about herself again. She loved him enough to marry him, he thought, so the least he could do was give her the time she needed and help her through it all.

Robert slid back in the chair and watched her until she awoke. Her black hair poured over her pillow like dark water. She sighed loudly before she even opened her eyes, then she stretched her arms out across the bed and arched her back. The sheets slipped down to reveal her side, smooth like a pink ivory tusk.
“Even in Italy you can’t be a morning person?” Robert said, and got up from the chair and kissed her forehead as she watched him through half-opened eyes. “I’ll get you some juice from downstairs.” He put on a pair of linen pants, pulled on a gray t-shirt and slipped into his leather sandals.

“I could eat anything right now,” she said, moving around awkwardly on the mattress, exaggerating her stretches to tease him. “Don’t take your time.” He tipped an imaginary hat to her then he shut the door behind him and went downstairs to the lobby where he asked the old woman at the desk for juice and something to eat.

“Do you want something big, or something small?” she asked.

“Big.” He sat down in the chair by the door and waited. Through the open front door he watched a family park their car across the street and walk down the steps to the beach. The mother held a basket with bread and wine sticking out from underneath a blue cloth napkin. Robert thought of how great it was that wine was such an essential part of their culture. Back in New York he had to keep explaining why he drank so much wine and with so many meals. Drinking even a glass or two of wine at lunch around his friends back in New York usually induced jokes about alcoholism. Here it was served with everything except breakfast. He didn’t have to justify his love for drinking wine to anyone.

The old woman called to him from the kitchen but he didn’t understand what she said. He spoke only in broken Italian and understood most of what sounded Spanish. The rest he pretended to know and nodded his head whenever he didn’t understand. The old woman came back to the desk carrying a tray with grape juice, focaccia, and a frittata made with egg, spinach, and ham that he thought looked like quiche. She gave him the tray and said it would be added to the price of the room. Robert smiled and took the food back upstairs.

Emily sat up in the bed and ate almost everything he brought. He ate a small piece of the flat bread and watched her. She ate like a ravenous child, not waiting to finish one bite before putting the next in her mouth with the fork.

“This is delicious,” she said, covering her mouth with a hand. “It’s simple, but amazing. I can taste the freshness of everything, the tomato, spinach, onion. Everything.” She finished the small glass of grape juice before putting the empty tray on
the floor by the bed. She had covered herself with one of his shirts while he was
downstairs.

“You really shouldn’t wear things like that,” he said, standing over her. He
pointed at the shirt. She looked up coyly.

“Why not?”

“It’s too sexy,” he joked.

She played with the fabric on her sleeve. “Oh, this?” She laughed and sat up on
her knees. “Why can’t I be sexy?”

“Because,” he said.

She looked down at the sheets. “I’m sorry about last night.”

“There’s nothing to be sorry for.” He knew she felt guilt for not being able to
make love yet.

“I can’t help it. I feel terrible.”

He leaned down and kissed her. “Don’t.” It doesn’t matter, he thought at least
not now. As long as we’re happy here, it doesn’t matter if we can’t make love for a
while. “I’m glad we’re here together. That’s enough.”

“OK,” she said. She smiled, squinting her eyes.

“But you’re going to have to stop eating like a pig.” He stepped back and
laughed. She lunged at him, swinging a pillow around from behind her back, hitting him
in the waist.

“You bastard,” she blurted. He pulled the pillow from her hand and fell on top of
her, pinning her down at the chest with his weight on the pillow. “This isn’t over.”

“I hope it never is,” he said. The glass on the floor clattered as the pillow fell
from the bed. Robert kissed her softly and ran his fingers up her arm to her shoulder and
then down around her breast. He brushed her hair back away from her face. She smiled
at him. He stopped. Her slate green eyes were bright against her red cheeks.

“What?” she asked.

“God,” he said. “You’re beautiful.” He brushed the back of his hand against her
cheek. “I can’t say it enough.” Her eyelids scrunched down over her eyes and she kissed
him. Her arms reached around his back and pulled him closer.
“Do you want to try again?” she asked. He pushed himself away from her with his arms and sat back on the bed.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.” She pulled him back and kissed him again. He wasn’t sure he wanted to try again so soon after the night before. He felt as though he had physically hurt her when they had tried. She had dug her nails into him. He didn’t want to hurt her, mentally or physically. Though, he knew they had to do something to get her past that point so that she could be normal again. Her hand guided his head down next to hers and her lips folded his earlobe between them. “I love you,” she whispered.

He kissed her cheeks and her neck. Her fingers traced along his spine delicately. He pulled Emily’s button-down shirt up over her head, tossed it on the floor, slid down to her breasts and kneaded them gently with his hands while kissing the outsides, the pale, fleshy skin that merged her breasts into her chest. Her body shuddered almost indiscernibly. The crumpled sheets fell off the edge of the bed. He kissed her skin along her pelvic bone before dropping lower.

They had done this many times before, pleasing each other in every way, raising each other’s heat to the point of bursting before attempting to join together. Nights when they had tried in the past, he had made her as comfortable as he could, working his way along her body, massaging her, trying to relax her until he thought she felt as though she was sinking into the sheets. Then he moved down between her legs. Only after the foreplay did she had tense up, as though a memory just out of reach remained just out of her vision, yet lingered prominently enough to stop her from continuing.

As he moved, he guided his hands up and down her waist gliding the tips of his fingers along her curves and massaging her muscles by moving his thumbs in circles. The warm breeze blew in from the open windows and tapped the shutters against the stucco outside. Robert felt the air drift over his back and along his arms. She reached down and slid his shirt off before falling back on the bed. In a quick movement, Robert slid his body along hers until he was face to face with her. The speed shocked her and she pressed her hands on the tops of his shoulders. Her uneven smile trembled over her teeth.

“Ok?” Robert whispered.
Emily nodded. Robert moved his hips closer and studied Emily’s expression. He slid his pelvis up to meet hers and watched as her eyes drifted up over his shoulder toward the ceiling. It felt unnatural to Robert. He wondered what she was thinking, where she was going in her mind. He wanted her mind to be there with him, but it seemed she didn’t want to be there, at least not the first time. He kissed her breasts, one then the other, moved his lips up her neck slowly, and looked into her eyes as he began to move into her. She bit her lip and grimaced, holding her gaze beyond him toward the ceiling, palms outstretched against his shoulders as though she was trying not to dig into him with her nails. Robert pulled back. Her face, briefly contorted in some unidentifiable pain, became too much for him to continue.

“Can’t,” he said.

“But I want to,” she insisted. She rubbed his arm.

“Not like this.” His hands were shaking. “Can’t do it like this. I don’t want to see you in pain like that.” He felt like the man that had raped her, high above her over the bed, her body trembling.

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. There’s nothing to be sorry for. It’s just going to take me a while too. To do this in a way that I can be comfortable with.”

She brushed her hair back away from her face. “OK.”

“I don’t want to hurt you. You understand that, don’t you?”

“Of course.”

Robert felt some connection with the other man, something repulsive and alien about creating the same act with her, even if it was out of a different emotion. Robert wanted to be with her out of love. The other man must have done it out of something else, hate, repulsion, Robert didn’t know, and he didn’t want to think about it.

Robert could hear the children laughing down by the water between the crashing of the waves.

“We have all the time in the world.” He picked up the tray from the floor to take it back downstairs.

“Exactly,” she replied.
Robert bent down over the bed and kissed Emily’s forehead. “What do you want to do today?”

“The beach. Then an early dinner, and a walk with you through town?”

“Perfecto,” he said, walking to the door. “You got it.” He walked out into the hall and shut the door behind him.
CHAPTER 3
IL CINGHIALE

They spent two more days on the coast before driving inland to Florence, where they found a cheap hotel called Il Cinghiale, a rustic, orange stone building with a small courtyard filled with hanging baskets of white and red flowers that surrounded two small tables. The proprietor was an old man over eighty, who wore a black wool blazer every day and sat alone on a bench beyond the front door underneath the wooden sign. In the afternoons, he sat in the shade and picked at a loaf of bread that he ate with prosciutto and white wine. When Emily and Robert had asked if he had a room, he smiled, revealing dark stained teeth, and a large dimple that had worked itself into a crease and had spread deeply up along his cheek. He took off his corduroy cap and struggled to stand, leaving his glass of wine and loaf of bread on the bench behind him.

“Buongiorno,” he said. He pointed to himself. “Fabrizio. Hotel.” He pointed at the sign, revealing a frail wrist beneath the cuff of the heavy jacket.

“Si,” said Robert. He followed Fabrizio down the dark walkway, through the courtyard and into a small office room that smelled of mildew and garlic. Behind a desk, Fabrizio wrote down a number and handed it to Robert.

“Per una notte,” he said.

“Ok.”

“Quante notti?”

“No se.” Robert watched Emily walking slowly through the courtyard. She stopped at a flower pot, leaned forward, and smelled slowly and deeply. It reminded Robert of when he had first met Emily, when she had slowly and deeply inhaled every spice she used at the Culinary Institute. Her lips turned up slowly as she breathed. Her eyes closed.

“Quante?” the old man asked again.

“Un poco tiempo. No se. Cinco, siete dias ?”
“Di Spagna?”
“No. Estados Unidos.”

Fabrizio smiled and put his hat back on his balding head. He took a set of keys from a drawer in his desk and motioned for Robert to follow him. As they passed through the courtyard, Emily joined them.

“This is beautiful,” she said, and tugged on Robert’s sleeve.

Fabrizio showed them the room, which overlooked the narrow street and the southern end of the city beyond the river. A small wooden cross hung above the queen-sized bed. Fabrizio pointed to the bathroom down the hall and Robert nodded. He watched the old man move slowly to the door. When Fabrizio turned around, he had an expectant look on his face.

“Si?” he asked.

“Perfetto,” Robert replied.

Emily put her arm around Robert’s and pulled him close. “Perfetto,” she said.

“Grazie.”

The old man nodded and gave a lonely sigh before he turned and shuffled out the door leaving Robert and Emily alone by the window where they stood and looked down over the cobblestone street.
CHAPTER 4
EMILY’S DREAM

That night they ate in, Fabrizio bringing them a light meal, and held each other listening to the people drinking at the small tables in the square at the corner of the street. Robert didn’t try to make love to her. Her past kept coming up in his mind but he dismissed it. It bothered him to think about what happened to her and he didn’t want to ruin their trip or their new life together by thinking about how hard it was for Emily to make love again.

In the morning, they woke to the scent of fresh bread coming from the panetteria across the street. Then Robert and Emily walked the cobblestone streets for two hours before stopping to have anything to eat. They walked in and out of alimenteri and gastonomie, admiring the dozens of different kinds of breads and meats that hung from the ceilings and sat awkwardly piled on tables in the middle of the shops. Robert bought a loaf of ciabatta and a quarter kilo of bresaola and he and Emily sat on a small cement bench in a square. They sat beneath two large trees that shaded them from the sun and Robert split the loaf of bread in two and handed one half to Emily. They shared a bottle of mineral water that they had bought from Fabrizio.

“Even the color of the bread is different than we make it,” Emily said. She pulled a small piece off and ate it. “This is so good.”

Robert placed a slice of the meat on a piece of bread and ate it. The light, salty taste of the cured meat was as delicate as the bread. He watched Emily eat a piece of the meat.

“What do you think?” he asked.
She smiled and finished chewing. “Better than anything we can get over there, that’s for sure.”

“Hard to believe we can’t just make the same exact things in the U.S.”
She ate the rest of the meat she had taken. “We use chemicals and preservatives, steroids and whatever. It’s difficult to recreate any of this without going to expensive natural food stores or ordering it on your own.” Her hand jostled around as she spoke and her voice became passionate and emotional. “I want to order it on my own. I want to have all this at my finger tips.” She leaned forward and shook both hands as if to say something that couldn’t be put into words. Her black hair fell over her eyes as she bent toward him. “I want to create this, all this back home.”

“I know,” Robert said.

“I mean everything.” She flipped her hair back. He watched her eyes search the square. “I want that,” she said, and pointed at a small restaurant with a terrace surrounded by a short iron fence.

“A restaurant?”

“Yes.” She looked at an old woman shuffling by with a bag of vegetables, her gray sweater torn and hanging loosely over her arched shoulders. “I think it’s what I’ve always wanted; I just didn’t admit it to myself.”

“That’s great.” He leaned over and hugged her, crushing the bread and meat against the bench with his leg.

“You think?” she whispered.

“Yeah, you’re halfway there already. You’re a cook; you have a husband who knows wine. You’re on your way. It’s…” He leaned back and looked into her eyes. “Perfetto.”

She laughed and hugged him. “I didn’t know if I should say it because I didn’t know if you would think it was just a pipe dream.”

“Emily,” he said, softly. “To me, there are no such things as pipe dreams.” His pants were stained from the fat and grease from a piece of bresaola that had stuck to his khakis.

She looked over at the restaurant, eyes so deep in dreams that Robert felt awkward. He had never seen such an expression before. He felt he was seeing a part of her that she had never shown him, her attention gone from everything else but the waitress walking slowly, delivering carafes of red and white wine to the people collected around the iron tables on the terrace. She stared and Robert watched her. He studied the
way her lips curled up only slightly as though her thoughts were too far away to give attention to a full smile. Then, after a long and silent moment, she turned to him.

“Thank you,” she said.

“For what?”

“For always supporting me.” Her voice was more confident now.

“You know I’ll always support you.” He picked at the bread with his fingers. “I love you. Isn’t that what this is all about?”

“I guess so.”

They ate the rest of the bread and meat and sat silently watching the people in the square. They passed the bottle of mineral water back and forth. A small, hunched over old man sat on a park bench on the opposite side of the park feeding a ragged dog that sat at his feet. It lurched forward awkwardly to catch small pieces of food that the man tossed up in the air. Robert could see a large tuft of hair missing from its thigh, a scab stretching out across the muscle. The old woman in the torn gray sweater walked slowly past the fountain, shifting her heavy bag of vegetables from hand to hand. A man and a boy kicked a dark leather ball back and forth in the open center of the square. Emily occasionally glanced back toward the restaurant until they were done eating.

“We’ll eat there for dinner,” Robert said.

“I’d love to.”

She’d be a great restaurant owner, he thought, improvising new recipes, and using old world ones. She was even good at finances and would probably make a killing, and if it was her dream, he had to support it. It was the only way he knew how to love.

When they stood to leave, the brown leather ball bounced against Robert’s calf and rolled under the bench. Emily bent down and scooped it up from the ground. The man who had been playing with the boy walked up slowly from beyond one of the trees. He wore a blue checkered shirt. His windblown hair looked prematurely grey.

“Mi dispiace,” he said, and held out his hand. “Dei mei figli.” Emily held out the ball and the man reached over and pulled it close to his chest. “Gracie,” he said, before turning and walking back around the tree. Robert watched him as he walked to the edge of the square, where the small boy joined him and they walked together along the edge of road, the man pointing back and waving when he saw that Robert followed them with his
eyes. Robert smiled, waved, and turned to Emily who stood with her hands together in front of her like a child waiting impatiently for a school bus. He reached out his hand and took hers, and the two of them walked slowly back to the hotel taking a different rout than the one they had arrived from.
CHAPTER 5
SAN GIMIGNANO

For the first week, they only tried to make love three times. Robert thought that everything else was so perfect that he was afraid to ruin it by returning to the awkwardness of attempting to make love and failing. He wanted to make love to her, but he wanted to be patient. She deserved his patience, he thought. But he couldn’t help but feel sexually frustrated. Somehow he felt disgust in both himself and in her for being a part of something as terrible as rape. Emily had no choice, yet he could not separate her from the act. When they tried to make love, he could not separate himself from the act either.

He felt sick when he thought about how she might briefly think of the other man when they tried to make love. Something about her made him uneasy. It sickened him when he thought that she had been not just through something so terrible, but involved in it at all, regardless if she was a victim. The thoughts confused him and he suppressed them when they arose. He hesitated to try to make love to her too many times, he thought, and wondered if it only made things worse. He avoided his confusion and repressed his need to have her.

Instead, they held each other and bathed together, all the while never moving beyond flirting and foreplay. They made love in other ways than intercourse, one or the other still too uncomfortable to follow through. Robert knew that it would take patience on both of their parts and he knew he felt prepared for it long before he had married Emily. He had known what it would take when he proposed to her the year before, one month after his mother had left his father.

The second week, they left Florence to travel to six Tuscan vineyards where they stopped to sample and buy wholesale wines. Robert’s childlike excitement pushed them from winemaker to winemaker until they exhausted themselves by the end of the week.
They continued inland through the countryside. The roads traced the meandering valley floors and cut through vineyards thousands of years old.

In the middle of the week, they stopped just west of San Gimignano to stay at Villa Rosa, a small stone cottage that Robert had reserved for them months before. Signora Ribaldi, a short thick woman with a square face, wide set eyes, and straw like gray hair, waddled out to meet them when they pulled in the driveway and Robert grinded the gears of the Renault. She and her husband lived in a small guest house behind the villa and rented out the large house to businessmen and families traveling through Tuscany on wine-related business. They were well known to vintners and importers alike. Robert’s friend Seth inquired among the wine circles in Manhattan to find a perfect house in Tuscany to stay. The Ribaldi’s and Villa Rosa came up as the best.

Before Robert turned off the car, Signora Ribaldi had already marched up to the passenger side door. She leaned into the window, her hair cramming against the roof of the car.

“Buona sera,” she said, her voice high and soft.
“Buona sera, Signora,” Emily replied. She turned to Robert. “Well?”
“Buona sera,” Robert said. Emily smiled at him.
“My English very bad,” said the Signora. “But come.” She waved them toward the house and marched down the brick walkway to the front door. Behind the house, the hills receded busily into the distance beyond kilometers of grapevines. The small stone houses stood like an escarpment against oaks and maples that cut across the land in ordered rows. Robert and Emily followed Senora Ribaldi into the house. “Kitchen.” She pointed to the back of the house. “Mine.” She tapped her fingers proudly against her chest and pulled at her blue apron. Her hair curled about her forehead in spirals. “I cook all meals. You tell. I cook.”


“Come,” the Signora said. She trudged through the house on heavy feet and up narrow stairs to the second floor. They followed. Her high voice echoed through the hall in front of them. “Water. Hot.” She pointed into a small bathroom with a curtainless
porcelain shower basin. “Yours.” In the bedroom, she slapped the comforter of the bed gently and walked to the window that overlooked the backyard and the valleys to the east. “Me and mio marito.” She pointed out the window to the small stone guest house set back from the driveway.

Robert nodded. “Grazie.”

Senora Ribaldi arched her shoulders back. “Our home your home, ok?” Her square jaw dropped to reveal a thick smile of stained teeth.

“Grazie,” Emily said. The Senora nodded and strolled out of the room. When her steps had fallen silent downstairs, Robert stood by the back window and wrapped his arms around Emily. They looked down the hill at the hundreds of acres of vines that glowed orange in the setting sun. Church bells rang almost indistinctly from a small church tower among a group of stone cottages on a neighboring hill. Emily collapsed on the bed, let out a loud sigh, and stretched across the comforter. Robert sat down in an old wooden chair by the window and ran his fingers through his hair. He felt fatigued from sleeping on so many uncomfortable beds the previous nights. He hadn’t slept soundly since they had stayed along the coast at the pension the week before.

“Perhaps we could check out that small town tomorrow,” he said. “It looks like it might be the smallest town we’ve seen yet.” He looked out the window. The sun had left the valleys in shadow. “Or perhaps we could just stay here and rest and not think about anything. Would that be better for you?” Emily lay with her back to him. “Emily?”

He stood up and walked quietly over to her. She breathed deeply, her eyes closed, her body sprawled diagonally across the bed, legs dangling off the corner. Robert lay down next to her, wrapped his arm around her waist, kissed her on the back of the neck, and closed his eyes, thinking of how they would spend the next four days with nothing to do but be with each other. Slowly the room fell into darkness and Robert decided to leave everything for tomorrow, the luggage, meeting Signor Ribaldi, exploring the rest of the house. He dismissed it all and tried to fall asleep next to Emily, both of them fully clothed and lying awkwardly across the comforter.
When Robert woke in the morning, the empty room glowed in the Tuscan sun. The quietness of the house had let him sleep longer than he expected. His watch read ten o’clock. The sun came through the window and shone along the grooves in the old wooden floor like the deep crease along the old man’s cheek in Florence. Emily’s clothes laid on the dresser and the chair. He searched the second floor of the house for Emily. His razor had been laid out next to the bathroom sink and moisture lingered thick in the air from Emily’s shower. Robert showered and when he finished, he shaved and dressed and descended the stairs into the kitchen.

Emily and Signora Ribaldi sat at the small mahogany table. They talked softly and looked up when Robert entered the kitchen. Signora Ribaldi’s high voice said, “Hello, Roberto.” She smiled her wide smile, stood, and marched toward the stove.

“Il est reveille plutot qu’en ne le’imaginait,” Emily said to the Signora.

“Oui,” the Signora replied.

Robert sat down at the table.

“Qu’est-ce-que vou voulez manger?” Signora Ribaldi asked. She lit the burner on the stove with a match.

“So the Signora knows French?” Robert said. He picked at a loaf of bread on the table and poured himself a glass of mineral water. Emily wore a spring dress with thin straps that fell down over her shoulders. Robert could smell her juniper shampoo. She laughed.

“Yes. So now we can communicate with her better.”

“You mean you can communicate with her better.” Robert smirked.

“Qu’est-ce-que vous voulez manger?” Signora Ribalda asked again.

“What are you in the mood for?” Emily asked Robert. She rubbed his upper arm gently.
“Surprise me.”
“Il a dit que tu devrais nous surprendre.” Emily said.
“Ok.” Signora smiled and nodded and continued adding vegetables in a small pan over the stove. Outside, the sun gave the surrounding hills a vibrant green glow through the back window. Robert finished his glass of mineral water. His throat had been parched from sleeping on his side all night.

Emily turned to Robert. “So what do we do today?”
“Anything you want to.”
“I’d like to rest,” she said. “Maybe watch Senora cook. See what she does differently. Then maybe go to a small restaurant really close and see what they have. That’s all.”
“OK.”

Emily got up and stood next to Senora Ribaldi to watch her cook.
“I didn’t know you knew French that well,” he said. He picked at the breadcrumbs on his plate.

“Of course. Just as well as you know Spanish.”
“I guess I just never heard you speak it so easily.”
“I never needed to.” She ate a small piece of tomato off of a plate of antipasto on the counter.

“Basta,” Senora Ribaldi’s high pitched voice rang out. She shook a spatula at Emily and pointed at the table.

Robert laughed. “Now you know what it’s like.”
Emily tilted her head, smirked, and sat down quietly at the table. “Yeah, yeah,” she whispered, and looked out the window toward the back patio.

That morning, after breakfast, they walked out into the yard and sat underneath an oak tree to admire the view. Robert laid a blanket down along a patch of low grass and poured himself and Emily a glass of Vernaccia and admired the small town of San Gimignano in the valley below. The hills rolled more busily than they did in New York, popping up and dipping more rapidly and more often than the wide sweeping hills of the Finger Lakes.
On the third day at Villa Rosa, Robert left Emily in the morning to visit Badia a Coltibuono, a renowned estate converted out of an abbey. Emily asked him to go alone so that she could rest. He told her he had to go because he wanted to sample as many Super Tuscans as he could in their short time in Tuscany.

He left Emily sitting at the small iron table on the back patio at Villa Rosa just after sunrise. He kissed her and promised to be back for dinner.

The abbey sat entrenched halfway up the hill of the vineyard, its large tan stones the color of the dried grass that rippled in rhythm with the wind on the hills beyond. Robert ground the stick shift of the small Renault into second gear and drove slowly up the sinuous access road to the front gate. After parking the car in the small gravel guest parking lot under a row of umbrella pines, he walked up to the small door marked The Visitor’s Center.

Inside, a cool breeze circulated the air from a slow moving fan above the reception desk. A young man, clean shaven and thin, gracefully laid bottles of wine on their sides on the shelves behind the desk. He smiled at Robert and kept working.

The walls, covered in wine racks, darkened the already dim room the size of a small warehouse. Besides the young man, the racks of wine, and the desk, the room was empty. Robert walked silently among the isles picking up bottles of chianti, sangiovese, and cabernet sauvignon.

When he walked up to the desk, the young man poured him an ounce of the Chianti Classico from the half-carafe and handed it to Robert. In the light from the window, the wine held itself perfectly, its color glowing and radiant. Robert inhaled the bouquet and closed his eyes. He focused on what smelled like prunes; then he took a small sip. He opened his mouth and breathed, letting the air move over the wine in his
mouth and bring out more aroma and flavor. He tasted dried orange, dark chocolate, and briefly, at the end, a saltiness came and left his tongue quickly. He nodded.

“Good.”

“Very good,” the young man replied. “Best.”

Robert sipped the last of the sample, held it in his mouth to savor it, then swallowed the last bit of wine. He glanced around the room looking for something more, but he realized he found what he came for and either he bought a bottle now, or he would leave knowing he tasted a great chianti.

The young man noticed his apprehension. “You must go to il Cascina, to watch the old way,” said the young man.

“The old way?” Robert asked.

“Si, il Cascina down the hill. It belong to us, to still do the old way. To remember.”

Robert shrugged. “Ok.”

The young man motioned Robert to follow him. They walked outside where the young man pointed to a farmhouse down the hill to the side of the abbey. “You are welcome to go,” he said.

Robert walked down the hill along a small stone path that connected the abbey to the farmhouse. He heard voices as he approached and slowed his step. On the far side of the building, under a canopy of vines that shadowed the stone wall, two old men sat on benches leaning against the edifice, while two girls unloaded bushels of grapes into a large oak bin. The old men motioned for Robert to sit down next to them on the bench and they poured him a glass of chianti from a fiasco, a wide wine bottle wrapped in wicker. The two girls followed him with their eyes. They were no more than nineteen, and giggled as though they were much younger.

After the taller girl dumped her second bushel into the oak bin, she slid her sandals off and climbed into the oak bin. The other girl with lighter hair and complexion, followed her. They began to move among the grapes, stomping and crushing them with their bare feet.

The old men talked amongst themselves and looked out over the valley, but Robert became entranced by the taller girl. Her long, straight black hair fell wildly about
her shoulders as she tried to maintain her balance and she kept having to pull her dress up higher above her knees to avoid getting it soaked by the juices in the bin.

Robert drank the rest of his chianti and thought of Emily. If she crushed grapes with them, would he watch her the same way he watched them?

The taller girls long legs glistened from the juices and the grape skins stuck to her thighs like rose petals. Her muscles twitched and firmed as she walked, high stepping, around the bin. Robert felt terribly attracted to her then. The old man next to him, skin stained dark like the skin of a bull, motioned for Robert’s glass. Robert accepted his offer, thankful of any excuse to take his eyes off of the girls, even if for a moment.

He drank half of the glass of wine before looking again toward the girls. They laughed quietly, fully aware of the voyeur before them. Robert couldn’t help but watch the tall girl’s thighs slide smoothly along each other as she raised her knees up almost to her chest.

Robert felt weak in his abdomen and imagined that if he tried to stand, he would fall back upon the bench. He focused his thoughts on not staring at the wild black hair and long legs, though they already worked their way indelibly across his memory.

The third week belonged to Emily, so they drove north to Bologna, Modena, and Parma. In Parma, they stayed at an inexpensive pension and ate at expensive restaurants. Robert studied the wine lists and Emily ordered their meals, so that she could sample whatever moved her on the menu. Robert agreed that he eat anything she wanted, as long as he could pick the wines to match. The week gave Emily hundreds of new ideas which she wrote down in a small notebook she carried with her in her pocket.
On the flight back from Italy, Robert sat in a seat against the window that looked out over the wing. He knew that, below the sea of clouds, lay the Atlantic Ocean.

The captain spoke over the intercom. He stated that there would be a substantial amount of turbulence from an incoming cold front. The girl sitting next to Robert shifted awkwardly in her seat.

Earlier, at the airport in Rome, while they sat waiting to board the plain, the steward announced an offer for a free round-trip ticket of equal value that would be awarded if someone gave up a seat and waited two hours for the next flight. Emily excitedly accepted the offer.

“I’ll call Seth and tell him to pick us up later,” she said. They sat by the window in the airport watching the planes take off. Robert nodded. He thought giving her two more hours in Italy seemed all he could do for now. She wanted to return soon, but Robert knew it might take years for his vineyard to make money, and years before they had as much free time as they did in the past three weeks.

“I’ll wait at your gate then,” he replied.

Emily hugged him and leaned back in her chair.

“When we come back, we’ll only need to buy one ticket.”

Two and a half hours later, over the Atlantic, he knew that her plane had taken off as well. It must have been somewhere over Spain by his estimations, maybe just reaching its cruising altitude.

In New York, he would wait at her arrival gate and they would find Seth together. Before they had left New York for the honeymoon, Robert had asked Seth to pick them up at the airport. Seth agreed and dropped them off as well, taking their car back to his apartment in Brooklyn.
Now, Robert sat looking out the window at the horizon of clouds. The woman in
the seat next to him shuffled again, her elbow brushing against Robert forearm lightly.
Her thin hands gripped the armrests and she stared ahead of her coldly. At first Robert
had thought she was angry. Her narrow eyes followed the plump stewardess up and
down the isle. She had sat almost expressionless for the past two hours. Robert thought
he perceived something familiar about the way she gleamed steadfastly ahead of her. He
looked out the window.

The tip of the wing slowly bounced and the roar of the engines increased. The
last three weeks had been almost surreal. He traveled all over northern and western Italy
with a woman he loved, tasting wines that he would rarely get the chance to taste in the
near future. Seth’s life would allow for such luxuries, he thought, but the life of a
winemaker held simpler ties to wine than that of a sommelier. He wanted to start
collecting rare wines as soon as his vineyard started making money, but he knew that for
the first ten years, most of the money he made would go back into the vineyard. The
chance to taste the wines on the vineyards made him smile. He felt his stomach drop
slightly as the plane dipped.

He wondered if the plane that Emily was on, more than two hours behind him,
shook the way his did, dropping occasionally, rocking slowly above the clouds. Lately,
he noticed she slept heavily and he imagined her sleeping through most of the turbulence.

The girl next to him appeared the opposite. Her eyes shifted nervously from the
stewardess to the other passengers. Robert watched her and tried not catch her eyes. She
sat straight up in her seat, her blond bun wrapped tightly, almost immaculately, high on
her head. She glanced around unpredictably and Robert caught her eye.

He expected to see nervousness, even some kind of uncertainty, but he saw fear,
deep and horrible.

He smiled as compassionately as he could to calm her, and she responded with a
smile, though her lips curled too tightly to suggest that it comforted her in the slightest.

Robert tried to guess her age. She looked younger than him, and beautiful.
Though nothing like Emily, something caught his attention as terribly attractive. In
passing glances, he studied her face, her figure, her hands, but he couldn’t place what
drew him to her. He thought that maybe he only felt an affinity with her because they were both alone on the shuddering plane and she, like him, probably contemplated death.

The cabin lights dimmed slightly as the fuselage jolted to the left. In the dim light, Robert noticed several strands of her hair fall from her bun and trace her jaw line to her chin. Even at such a moment, Robert caught himself questioning what about her confused and enticed him to keep glancing at her.

The pilot spoke briefly in Italian, and then repeated himself in English, “Please fasten your seatbelts; we are entering the cold pressure system. It may get pretty bumpy for a few minutes.” The seatbelt light above his head flashed on followed by a soft bell. The woman at his side tightened her seatbelt and slammed her hands on the armrests.

The two stewardesses at the back of the plane walked slowly forward pushing the refreshment cart until they reached their seats just behind the galley and the cockpit. They sat down and fastened their seatbelts. Robert thought that the second announcement must have contained a code so that they knew to buckle up as well. He knew that normally, unless things got really bad, the stewardesses kept serving food and drinks throughout the flight.

He studied the girl next to him and thought about the horrible fear he saw in her eyes. If she had never been on a plane before, this wouldn’t be so odd. Yet he heard her speaking in American English to a stewardess before take-off. She must have been raised in the United States.

He wanted to help her, to somehow take away some of the fear and nervousness he saw in her eyes. He thought of placing his hand on hers.

The plane began to dip and shake. The wing tip jumped up and down against the horizon. The girl at his side stiffened up.

He thought of Emily. He wondered if, in two hours she would experience the same thing, alone, like the girl next to him. Or, he hoped, she would sleep through it, though it seemed impossible the way the plane chaotically shifted.

The fuselage dropped, rose and jarred the passengers down into their seats. Silence came over the cabin. Everyone had stopped speaking, as though simultaneously holding their breath. At that moment, Robert thought, each person must have imagined their own deaths, glancing at the faces next to them, around them, wondering if these are
the people they are to die with. He thought of his own death, the time it would take for
the plane to drop the hundred thousand feet, the millisecond impact into the water. Then
nothing. This woman next to him would be the last face he saw.

Then his thoughts moved to Emily.

He hoped that if Emily’s plane went through the same turbulence, it didn’t go
down. And if it did, that maybe she would sleep through it all, like she sleeps through so
many things in the mornings, a trait perhaps aided by her youth in Brooklyn. If she died
in the crash, she’d die alone, like the woman next to him, but if she could sleep through
all the commotion, she’d die peacefully, not knowing the horrible solitude of a lonely
death. But death brags about the loneliness, he thought, that it is the one thing we must
all do alone.

He looked at the girl with the blond bun. The desperation in her eyes pained him.
Her eyebrows twitched high into her forehead.

He imagined himself, in the midst of the turbulence, reaching out and placing his
hand over hers. He thought of how he would try to calm her with his touch as the plane
descended. The human contact, the only thing he could give then, would be what they
both needed. Would it be a betrayal to Emily, he wondered. How could it? What both he
and the girl next to him would need if they were both about to die, the plane crashing into
the ocean below, was human contact.

They would need each other, the touch, the awareness of another human being
experiencing the same fears, the same horrible thoughts. He knew that he would reach
out to her if the plane began to dive. He would try to console and love her in their mutual
deaths and he hoped she would do the same. Even though she, the stranger sitting next to
him, might not initiate such an act, Robert knew that he would. He looked at the bare
ring finger of her left hand and wondered who she would be leaving behind, if anyone.

Again he envisioned Emily on the other plane. What if her plane crashed?
Would she reach out to someone else? What would it matter? If asleep, Emily would die
peacefully, her life with him still valid, still there. He would die with this stranger on the
plane, the human touch the only true awareness of their last moments.
A little more than a year before his marriage to Emily, his father described the event of his mother’s leaving that day. Over the phone, his father’s voice reminded him not of the overwhelming sadness of the conversation, but of his mother’s cooing laughter, like the cluster of nervous pigeons in Battery Park when they had waited to take the ferry across the Hudson to see the Statue of Liberty. He was seven that day and her quivering laughter had caused the small flock to flutter uncomfortably before they scattered away from the park bench on which he sat with his parents. She laughed even harder when it happened, trying to conceal the similarity between her voice and the pigeons’ by covering her mouth with her hand. Now, the voice of his father fluttered in a different way, in insecure trembles through the phone as he tried to tell his son that his mother had left them.

Robert sat in a dorm room in Hyde Park, New York. His father called from their house in Lakemont, a small town on the western shore of Seneca Lake in Central New York. Two years into his sommelier’s education, only months away from his certificate, Robert’s father was calling to tell him that his mother was not coming back. She returned from town one afternoon, walked into the living room where Robert’s father had been reading over bills, and told him she wanted to leave him. That evening only minutes after she had left, his father called him. He listened as his father explained the events of the morning in a soft and somber voice.

“She came in as she normally does,” he said. “Walked into the kitchen, put her keys on the center aisle, put her purse on the back of one of the kitchen chairs.” He stopped. The emptiness on the line disturbed Robert. He waited to hear his father continue but there was nothing. This couldn’t have happened, Robert thought. His father cleared his throat. “Then she stood over me in the living room. Her voice was normal. She said she wanted to leave. I thought she meant go back into town, do some errands,
chores, that maybe she just had some kind of cabin fever.” He paused. “But then she said she was leaving me. That she had a job lined up in California.”

The conversation happened not long before Emily told Robert about the rape. Robert rushed to propose to Emily only months after his mother had left his father, yet Emily didn’t mention the rape until then. Robert thought of Emily, then his mother, and realized he wanted to help Emily through it all.

At twenty, after going to college for two years, Robert moved to Manhattan to become a sommelier. The love for wine ingrained itself by a family consumed in the vintner’s life. The next step, he felt, was to be the expert. The last thing he felt he wanted then, was to struggle on the vineyard and wonder about the next vintage, when to pick, when to bottle. The variables that could create bad wine scared him; they had consumed his youth. As a sommelier, he wanted to love only the wine, but know it well, and help others appreciate what it meant to drink great wine, the stresses of the vineyard left behind to his parents.

They had been married for almost exactly thirty years. Robert had driven home only months before to deliver crystal Bordeaux glasses to them on their anniversary. He hadn’t noticed anything that suggested unhappiness under the surface of their relationship.

“When did she get a job in California?” Robert said, more out of confusion than curiosity. “Where in California?” He realized how unimportant the question was.

Robert glanced around his dorm room. He had lived there on and off for two years, juggling time between Manhattan and wine pairing courses at the Institute. He had found a loophole in admissions at the Institute and had begun taking wine-related courses to help in his studies. Manhattan gave him the prestige of working with great wine list and gaining experience by being around certified sommeliers, while the Institute helped him understand wine’s relationship to food. It was all he wanted when he had left home, to know wine like he knew vineyards, each flavor, each bouquet, each wine’s place next to a meal. Before the phone call he was looking over wine-pairing charts and guides he had placed about the floor.

“Where exactly is she going to go?” he asked.
“I don’t know,” his father said. There was silence for a long time. Robert thought the only solace his father had at that moment might have been knowing his son listened at the other end of the line. The woman his father loved left him, Robert thought, for what seemed like no reason. A striking fear moved over him. He wanted to hear Emily’s voice, stern and soft, telling him it was ok, that what his mother did wasn’t normal.

She lived in the dormitory to the east just before the Hudson River. He loved her and had recently told his parents that he was bringing her home to meet them. Now, his mother wouldn’t be there. She would never be there.

Then he imagined his father growing old in the house in Lakemont overlooking the water and working the land alone, twenty years into the future, his father’s frail form walking along the edge of the property every morning before sunrise, too weak to bend down and train the shoots along the trellis. Robert dismissed the thought. He regretted never taking Emily home to meet them. Maybe his mother would have been reminded of family and not have left.

He and Emily had never gone anywhere together except along the Hudson River, from Manhattan up to Albany. He had planned to take her to see his parents in central New York when the grapes were ready for harvest. Now, his broken home seemed less attractive. He felt almost ashamed. But that didn’t matter now and it was his father that he had to think of. He had told Emily about how they had always tried to make tradition out of anything remotely wine-related. His father lived by tradition. Robert wondered if he might die without it.

“I’m going to come home,” Robert said. His father’s breath sounded heavy through the phone.

“No, Robert. Don’t do that.”

“Maybe there’s something I can do.”

“She’s gone, Robert. She left hours ago with everything she wanted to take.”

“Not for her,” Robert said. “For you.”

“There is nothing you can do for me,” his father said, slowly. “This is something I have to deal with by myself.”
“I didn’t know there were any real problems.” His father didn’t respond. “Where are you now?”

“In the kitchen.”

Robert imagined his father sitting in a chair at the end of the bare table. His mother would have taken the crystal centerpiece she had bought on their honeymoon in France. The kitchen walls would have been stripped of her collection of framed wine labels, her cork wreaths, and her antique applesauce press would be missing from the corner by the sliding-glass door. The living room would be without her burgundy Amish quilt that hung over the sofa, her grandmother’s rocking chair where the wood on the seat was worn smooth from three generations of women rocking. His father had probably been sitting at the table since she had left.

“What are you going to do?” Robert said.

“Nothing.”

Robert thought of his father chasing after her, begging her to stay, but it seemed an alien fiction, as though he knew it was impossible. Robert looked around his dorm room among the scattered books and photographs on the floor. The whitewashed, almost antiseptic walls reflected the yellow streetlights in the parking lot outside. He sat in the middle of papers and photographs, creasing the pages of a textbook under his leg. It all made him angry. His mother never let on that she was unhappy, not to him. He hadn’t seen anything, any evidence that she wanted to leave. His parents never fought, rarely raised their voices to each other. Most of the time they were just very quiet, working on the vines, eating breakfast, lunch, and dinner together, cooking together. He couldn’t remember when they started to become quieter. But he realized that they had. It didn’t make sense that she would just walk away from the life they had for thirty years.

“I’m sorry, Dad.” His father tried to hide a sigh, but it hummed through the phone. Robert wanted to call Emily, get in the car, and drive the three hours to his father, drive home immediately just to sit with him. “What can I do?”

“You can try not to worry about me for one,” his father said. “And finish your courses.”

“Right,” he said. “That’s what I’m here for, right?”

“You said it.”
The dark dorm room echoed with the sound of the receiver hitting the cradle and a small chip of plastic fell from the phone to the floor.

He called Emily and told her what his father had said.

“Do you want to go?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” he said. “I don’t know what to do.” He stood and stepped over the pile of papers he had pressed into the carpet and sat on his bed. “I never would have guessed this.” Then again, he hadn’t spent a lot of time at home in over two years. Between the courses at the Culinary Institute and his time in Manhattan, he hadn’t seen his father and mother more than a few short days at a time. The harvest was coming up quickly in October. She should have stayed for that, he thought. It would be like leaving just before the holidays.

“Let’s go right now,” Emily said. Her voice was soft but assertive. “Come pick me up. I’ll be outside in fifteen minutes.” She hung up the phone before Robert could reply. He dropped the phone on the receiver and stared at the pile of photos and reports at his feet. It was all the knowledge of wine and food he had learned and needed to learn to get his sommelier’s certificate. In less than three days he planned to take a food pairing test; then he was to return to Manhattan to finish the necessary courses. The piles of papers looked blank strewn about the floor. The view of the parking lot and the soccer field beyond became shrouded in a fog. What do I take with me, he thought. He scanned the floor and the dresser. Aside from the books on the floor, the sheets on the bed, and the sparse pictures on the walls, the room was almost completely empty.

From the dresser he picked up a waiter’s corkscrew that his father had given him on his twenty-first birthday. He unfolded and exposed the corkscrew and ran his index finger along the spiraling steel. The oak handle had been rubbed smooth from his nervousness and the stain had blurred the grains. He always kept it in his pocket and thumbed it as he walked. It glimmered in the darkness of the room. He folded it, slipped it in his pocket and tried to think of anything else of value he had in the empty dorm room. He opened drawers and looked under the bed. He laid out his clothes and counted his books. It was all expendable.

His whole life there, the two years he had stayed in that room—all expendable. He thought to walk away from everything right then, go back and stay with his father and
leave everything behind, everything except Emily. He realized that without Emily his life over the past two years would have been empty. The certificate and the knowledge of wine meant less to him than he had ever realized. Now, with his father’s lonely voice still fresh in his memory, Emily lingered as the only part of his life he didn’t want to lose.

Then he thought of the vineyard and how his family had been when he was younger. His parents and he had lived and worked together there for the twenty years he had lived at home. It was a self contained, subsistent world, a single beautiful vineyard overlooking miles and miles of surrounding hillside that blended and merged from one winery into the next. They were part of a community of the obsessed. Each acre precious, each bunch of grapes coveted. It didn’t take much for him to fall in love with all of it, including the wines themselves. Emily and the vineyard, he thought, the only two things he had ever truly loved. He began packing a small duffel bag with clothes. He left the light off and shoved anything he could find down into the bottom of the bag.
He was eight when his parents first allowed him to taste their wine. It was bitter and dry, just grape juice gone bad that people liked because they were told to like it. It was in mid-November when they usually tasted the wine and they let Robert stay up late and sit with them in the warehouse bundled and curled up in a knitted blanket. His father had told him that it was an acquired taste and that it would take a long time for him to appreciate it, but when he did, he would understand his parents’ love for it and he would understand what it meant to them to live on a vineyard.

In the cold warehouse that night, his mother said it was creating the wine that was so wonderful, creating such complexity from only grapes. She said it was the greatest form of creation aside from life itself. His father smiled, shook his head, and said that more importantly it was understanding the land, the soil, the weather, and knowing it all so well that you could eventually feel the right time to harvest. He said he still waited for the time when he would know his vineyard so well that he knew when to harvest by listening to his heart.

Robert immediately became fascinated with the passion he heard in their voices, though he didn’t understand where it came from. He had decided to appreciate everything his parents did as much, if not more than they ever could. As a young man, to be a sommelier, an expert, seemed the next step for someone raised on a vineyard by parents so obsessed with the complexity of wine.

Now, he studied his room in the dark for a long time. The walls were bare except for a few pages ripped out of wine magazines with little quips about heart and passion. They were almost embarrassing, like lines from pop country music that he didn’t tell anyone he liked. The photos were sentimental and pastoral and reminded him of his family’s vineyard. The mess of papers on the floor had been scattered about haphazardly.
The past two years seemed filled with memorizing and repeating everything he had learned, blind taste tests, chemistry classes, anything that would help him better understand wine. And then there was Emily. He had met her when he arrived at The Culinary Institute in Hyde Park, in a class on Mediterranean cuisine. He took the course out of curiosity, not necessity, and they had been paired together. He had dated her in between his courses in Manhattan and his courses at The Culinary Institute. She was from Brooklyn and lived in the dorm next to his on the fourth floor with a view to the west that overlooked the river and the Catskill Mountains.

He remembered watching her cook an Italian meal in class from across the kitchen. She had raised a piece of fennel to her nose, closed her eyes, and inhaled slowly. Her black hair fell from her shoulder and covered her face. Her delicate shoulders rose and fell softly as she kept breathing in the scent of the fennel. Robert picked up a piece of fennel at his table and inhaled deeply. It smelled like anise or Sambuca, strong and overwhelming in his nose, alive in a way he hadn’t expected. He had never smelled fennel until that moment.

Throughout that class, Robert had watched Emily smell everything. She held a branch of rosemary close to her lips, rubbing the small needles gently along her mouth before tracing her tongue along the ridge of her lips. Later, when no one was looking, Robert rubbed a small stem of rosemary against his lips. The sap stuck to his flesh. He licked his lips and tasted the potent flavor force its way over his tongue, filling his whole mouth with its energy.

She had shown him a new way to look at food, ingredient by ingredient, breaking it down the same way he had learned to taste wine. He realized that she concentrated her senses the same way he did, overruling all but one, focusing it, and savoring whatever outcome came from such concentration.

When he left the dorm room, he left the papers on the floor, the alarm clock on the dresser, and walked down the stairs to the car. The brisk wind in the parking lot was filled with the scent of burnt cherry from wood-burning-stoves being carried away. Dead leaves scratched along the pavement and caught themselves in the cracks along the curb. Emily would finally meet his father, he thought, though in the worst way. He couldn’t
face his father alone, and bringing someone might unconsciously hurt his father. But he couldn’t go alone. He needed her.

Then he thought of how his mother had left not only his father’s life, but his own. She got up that morning and decided to leave for another vineyard. Or, he thought, she could have decided months, maybe years before. Hadn’t she really left them both them? Why now, he thought. She had walked away from what seemed to be her entire life that morning. He knew California made better wines overall, but to be left for that reason seemed impossible.

He piled his things in the back of the Honda, shut the trunk, and climbed in. He prayed quietly that the engine would start. The Accord was ten years old and backfiring religiously. It purred quietly and he drove along the ridge above the river to Emily’s dormitory. She stood under a streetlight bundled in her oversized winter jacket, her scarf wrapped around her neck and the lower half of her head. Robert laughed quietly as he pulled up. Her silhouette looked like an owl against the streetlight. He hopped out of the car and put her bag in the trunk quickly.

“You look like a cartoon,” he said, laughing.

“Shut up,” she mumbled. Her voice was caught behind the scarf. Her eyes squinted and Robert knew she was smiling. The creases on the outsides of her eyes deepened when she happy; Robert didn’t need to see her smile to know it. “How is he?” she asked.

“What can I say? I think he’s still in some kind of shock.”

Emily’s eyes opened wide. “I’m sorry.” She moved slowly, pressed her body against Robert’s, held him tightly, and fluttered her mitten-covered hands along his back. “Let’s go.”

In the warmness of the car Robert felt thankful that Emily had initiated the trip. He needed to go; he knew that. But Emily forcing him to go made him happy. He knew she wouldn’t let him be weak when his father needed him most.

* * * * *

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Robert and Emily arrived in Lakemont at nine thirty. He put his hand on her knee. “Thanks for doing this with me.” She smiled in the light from the dashboard and put a hand on top of his. They pulled up the long gravel driveway past fifteen acres of grapevines, the acre-sized pond, and the sporadically planted rose bushes. The trellis and wire among the vines glimmered from the headlights as they turned back and forth up the driveway. The outside of the house sunk into the darkness around it. When Robert turned the car and the headlights off, he could barely make out the outline of the house against the night sky, the darkness, devoid of stars, in front of him guiding him up the gravel. He and Emily walked up to the house and in without knocking.

“Wait here,” Robert whispered. He left her in the foyer and walked down the hall. At the back of the house, the kitchen light was on, reflecting off the Spanish tile floor. Robert walked from room to room looking for his father. He kept walking back to Emily, who waited, arms folded uncomfortably, in the dim front hall. She shifted from foot to foot.

The empty house echoed with his footsteps. He tried to remember if he saw his father’s truck parked next to the house but the darkness had overtaken everything outside. He brought Emily down the hall and they sat at the table in the kitchen under a dim ceiling lamp.

“Where do you think he is?” Emily asked. Robert stared out the sliding-glass door. His mother’s garden spread out over most of the back yard. She grew vegetables and spices in narrow rows all the way back to the edge of the property to the north. They had one fresh vegetable with every meal when the vegetables were in season. When there was no way to get fresh vegetables from the garden, she drove into town to Andrew’s Country Store to get the next best thing. Robert remembered how she prided herself in fresh fruits, raw vegetables, organic anything. He saw a gray form crawling between rows of tomatoes out in the yard beneath a floodlight. He walked over to the glass door and saw his father bending over the garden, splaying leaves with dirty hands.

“He’s out there,” he said.
CHAPTER 11
SUPPORTING THE FAMILY

Robert watched his father through the sliding glass door. With his back to the house, he raked at the ground with his bare hands, sliding on his knees along a row of tomato plants. His back arched low, below the wire that held the thin leaves of the plant up toward the dark sky.

“Should I go out there?” Robert asked quietly.

Emily stood up from the table and walked to the back door. “Absolutely.” She glanced about the kitchen. “I’m going to wait in the front of the house. Get him to come inside and talk to him for a while.” She brushed her hair back away from her face and kissed him on the cheek. “Good luck,” she whispered.

“Right.” He nodded. He needed to talk to his father alone, let him feel comfortable for a while before mentioning that he had brought Emily with him. She rubbed his shoulder gently before stepping quietly into the living room and out of sight.

Robert slid the glass door open slowly. He closed the door behind him and stepped out into the early October night and into the illuminated circle underneath the floodlight. His father dragged his knees behind him and dug around the base of the tomato plants, his bare hands stained dark brown, the wrinkles filled in with shades of soil. It was almost ten thirty at night and getting very cold. Robert thought of his father’s hands, the poor circulation and the cold would cause them to stiffen up, almost freeze, if he stayed out too long. His father saw him coming and struggled to stand.

“I thought I told you not to come,” he said.

“I know.”

“Then why did you come?” He put a hand on his lower back.

Robert didn’t answer.

“I’m fine, you know.”

“Right,” Robert replied. “That’s why you’re gardening at ten at night.”
His father gave a half-smile and his teeth flickered in the light. He nodded slowly. “Well, I can’t sleep.”

Robert walked up to him slowly, studying his face. His father’s cloudy gray hair stood on end from the wind. His eyes, set back deep above the redness of his cheeks, looked hollowed out by the shadow of the light. The fall breeze seemed to unsettle him but he put effort into standing up straight. Around him, the soil in the garden had been churned up, fresh dirt exposed to the air.

“Why the garden, though?” Robert asked.

“It’s all I can see right now with no moon.” He dusted his hands on his already muddy jeans. “Although I don’t know what the hell I’m doing.” He gave a subtle smile. “The whole garden will be dead in a month.”

“But you know grapes.”

“Yes,” his father said. “Pretty good too.” He reached down a picked up a small trowel he had been working with.

“I brought someone.”

“Who?”

“Emily.”

His father motioned with his hand for them to walk back to the house. “I finally get to meet her, eh?”

“Yeah.”

“That’ll be nice.” His voice was hoarse.

Robert followed his father into the kitchen. The scent from the exposed soil followed them inside. Robert sat at the kitchen table and watched his father walk over to the sink, wash his hands, and dry them with a towel that hung above the stove.

“Well,” his father began. “Where is she? You leave her in the car?”

Robert laughed. “I thought about it.”

“Let me see her.” He walked around the counter dusting the surface with the towel. “If I had known, I would have cleaned,” he joked. Soft desperation lingered in his voice. Robert called out to Emily. She walked slowly into the kitchen with somber eyes and a delicate step.
“Hello, Mr. LeBarge,” she said softly. Her skin was pink from the cold. His father walked up to her silently and shook her hand. His hand, almost snow white, concealed her tiny fingers. “Your ice cold, sir.” She looked at Robert as though she said something wrong.

“Circulation,” Robert’s father said. “And Steve. My name is Steve.” He smiled. “Robert told us…me all about you. It’s nice to meet you.” He motioned for her to sit down at the table. “Coffee?”

“Yes please,” Emily replied.

Robert shook his head. “You know I don’t drink it.”

“Have to ask, right?” his father said.

“You have a wonderful home, Steve,” Emily said. She glanced at Robert and smirked. Her tone had become friendlier. “So this is where Robert was raised?”

“Yes. Robbie lived here for twenty years.”

“And you?” she asked, hesitantly.

“Thirty.” Steve poured two cups of coffee from the coffee pot and sat down at the table. “Twenty three of them vintage years.”

“Wonderful.” Emily sipped her coffee. “Good vintages?”

Robert wanted to stop her. He watched his father’s expression for discomfort. The past seemed to him like something that shouldn’t be brought up now, with his father suffering the pain of his wife leaving.

“Mostly the last few years.” He didn’t struggle. “We keep getting better now.” It was as though he had completely separated his relationship with the vineyard with the relationship with his wife. “This year promises to be the best, right, Robbie?”

Robert nodded and put his elbows on the table. The weather had been almost perfect that year. Sunny enough to ripen and sweeten the grapes perfectly. Just enough rain to make the grapes full. “You just have to harvest them before the frost.”

His father looked at him intently. “Of course we’ll harvest them before any frost. We can’t afford to lose so much money.”

“No more,” Robert said.

“That’s right,” Steve replied. “No more.” Robert thought of how the frost might only hurt one vintage, but there were hundreds of other problems his father had to face.
every year. He wondered about the fragility of the vine stems and the cold weather, of all
the problems beyond a simple frost that his father always held in the back of his mind to
protect his vines. He thought about the year they lost most of their vines to infection. In
the three years it took to recover, they had almost lost everything.

“Well, I’m impressed, Steve,” Emily said. “Robert told me it was a tiny vineyard.
I had no idea it was this big.”

Steve leaned forward. “Oh, it’s too dark to see it all from the driveway. You
haven’t seen the half of it.”

Emily turned to Robert. “This is tiny to you?” she laughed.

Robert smiled and shrugged his shoulders.

“You want a tour?” Steve asked.

“Now?” Emily looked at Robert and questioned with her eyes.

“Of course.” Steve stood up. “I’ll get some flashlights.” He brushed his hand
through his hair and quickly disappeared down the back hall.

Moments later, Robert’s father walked slowly along the edge of the property
pointing with his flashlight as he talked to Emily who listened intently beside him. They
walked slowly and sipped coffee from travel mugs. Robert followed close behind, happy
that his father had any kind of distraction from whatever he was feeling. Emily joked and
laughed with them while they walked. Their breath rose between them in the light of the
flashlight like fog lifting. Robert felt glad that she had come with him. To be alone with
his father would be exhausting and he could tell Emily was trying to cheer up his father
with her charm. Her eager, contagious laugh made Robert smile. Steve’s tranquil voice
softly explained the layout of the vineyard to Emily. Stars glimmered and speckled
above Seneca Lake as it pulsed and shimmered in the valley.

“Above and along each row,” Steve began. “We run a small tube that delivers
water to each vine stem if necessary.” He shone his light against a small black tube
nestled among the longer vine shoots. “It’s one of the only things we can regulate.”

“What do you mean?” Emily leaned down toward the roots of the vine.

“We can’t control temperature, lack of sunlight, or surplus of rainfall, but we can
add water if we have a dry season. It’s the only thing, besides trimming the leaves to
allow for more sun, that we can do to control the growth and ripening of the grapes.”
Emily nodded and stepped back. She seemed thoroughly interested. They walked slowly down the hill to the east toward the warehouse past the tall vines that ended the eastern rows.

“What are these vines bigger?” Emily asked. The light from her flashlight illuminated the thick roots and trunks. “Are they older?”

“Yes,” Steve said. He looked at Robert who shrugged apologetically. “They survived a winter that the rest of the vines did not.” He rubbed his hands together quickly to warm them.

“What happened?” she asked.

“We lost almost everything to infection.” He peered out over his land. “These here were the only ones I could save.”

“But it’s all ok now,” Robert interrupted. “Now they’re just a reminder that it won’t happen again.” He put his hand on his father’s shoulder.

“Right,” his father said.

“How long before you had another vintage?” Emily asked.

“Three years,” Steve replied. He rubbed his hands together. “A long three years.” Robert nodded and put his arm around Emily. She smiled shyly and hugged him back. “Well,” Steve said. “How about I give you a tour of the warehouse tomorrow when it’s light out and a bit warmer?”

Emily agreed and they followed Robert’s father back up to the house. Inside, they sat at the kitchen table. Steve asked if they wanted a glass of wine and pulled three glasses out of the cupboard and placed them on the table.

“It’s ours,” he said. “Last year.”

“I can’t say no,” Emily joked. He poured three glasses from a half finished magnum bottle. “Merlot?”

“You got it,” he said.

Robert held his glass up. “To the harvest.” Emily smiled and turned to Robert’s father.

“To your harvest,” she said.

Steve grinned, clanked his glass against theirs, and took a large sip of the wine. Robert tasted the wine and focused his thoughts on the subtleness of oak and vanilla
underneath berry notes and something almost like currant that lingered in his mouth. He had never tasted a wine from his father’s vineyard so complex. It impressed him more than he had expected. New York reds rarely had so much character. He folded the liquid around his mouth savoring the richness the vanilla flavor gave it and the fruity contrast to the tartness of the tannin. His father smiled.

“You like it?” he asked.

Robert said, “I didn’t know we made wine this good.” He kept sipping. He didn’t want to put his glass down.

“We didn’t until last year’s aged so well.”

“This is really good, Steve,” Emily said. “I don’t normally like drinking Merlot without food, but this is wonderful.” Robert drank the rest of his wine and poured another glass.

“I’m proud of this one,” Steve said. “This time I felt I almost knew exactly when to harvest on my own, without consulting chemistry or anything.”

“From your heart?” Robert asked. Steve nodded and finished off his glass. He closed his eyes for the last sip, his lips curling in a grin.

“Exactly,” he whispered. He placed his glass down on the table while keeping his eyes closed. For a moment, they sat quietly. Steve sat still, mouth and eyes closed, hands on the table, gray hair fluffed out around his ears, his shoulders dropped in a comfortable slouch. Then he stood from the table without warning. “Well,” he said. “I know it’s late and all, but I’m going to head back outside. I think I was beginning to enjoy it.”

“How were your hands?” Robert asked.

“Tolerable,” his father replied. He never complained. If Robert had not known about the pain, he would never have guessed that his father suffered so much.

“Thank you for the coffee and the wine,” Emily said. She smiled and squinted her eyes.

“Of course.” A cold gust of wind blew into the kitchen before he shut the sliding glass door behind him.

“What do you think?” Emily asked Robert.

“I think it’s a good thing we’re here.”
“Did he seem ok?” She rubbed her thin arms.

“Actually, yes. He seemed better than I expected.” He stood up. Robert had not really known what to expect but he expected a heaviness that Emily had somehow kept away.

“Thank you for coming with me,” he said. He stood behind her and massaged her shoulders. She reached up and put a hand on his. He knew it would have been more difficult to do it alone. Emily took both his and his father’s mind off of his mother momentarily, and for that he was grateful.

“You would do it for me, wouldn’t you?” she whispered. He would have done exactly the same, even more, to make anyone in her life happy, or to distract anyone in her life from their pain.

“I love you,” he said. She turned and looked up at him. Her smile stretched tight across her face. He had never said it before. Her green eyes glistened and the flesh around the edges creased. She stood up and kissed him. “I needed you here, you know.” He held her around the waste.

“No you didn’t,” she said. “But thanks for thinking that.” She kissed him again.

“You were great tonight,” he whispered.

“He seems like a wonderful father.”

“He is.” He thought of his mother and wondered where she would be tonight, where she was staying, with whom. Emily’s smile made him dismiss the thoughts. He combed his fingers through her hair slowly, kissed her forehead, and wrapped his arms around her holding her small frame, inhaling the scent of juniper in her hair. Over her shoulder, he looked beyond the glass door to where his father bent low to the soil digging awkwardly, almost viciously, with is bare hands.
CHAPTER 12

PEACE OF MIND

Robert woke to laughter and the clatter of plates coming from down the hall. He slipped on a bathrobe and checked where Emily had slept. The room was empty, the sheets lazily at the foot of the bed. At the Institute, they sometimes slept in the same bed, but she had slept in the guest room out of respect for his father. She didn’t want to make a bad first impression. Even though they had never made love, they often slept together talking late into the night. Last night, he and Emily had stayed up long after his father had gone to bed. They talked quietly in his room about how much time he should spend with his father. Emily said she didn’t know how long it would take, but that Robert needed to visit more often until he knew his father was ok. He agreed.

Now, Emily’s high nervous giggle lured him into the kitchen. She sat at the island in a high chair and leaned over the countertop. His father stirred eggs in a pan over the stove. He looked slightly refreshed; the darkness under his eyes had vanished. His hands moved quickly about the stove.

“Robbie,” he said. “Sit down next to your girl there and get ready for this.” Robert glanced around confused.

“Your father claims he can make the best scrambled eggs in the world.” Emily laughed. “I told him to prove it.” She leaned over and kissed Robert on the cheek.

“The trick is to cook them slow,” his father said.

“How did you sleep?” Emily asked.

“Well enough, I imagine,” Robert replied. “Dad, you did know she’s a chef?” Steve smiled at him. “That’s the point, Robbie. I’ve been cooking these for over thirty years. Time equals experience too, you now.” He pointed the spatula at Emily. “So don’t be surprised when they actually are the best you’ve ever tasted.”

Emily laughed, and placed her elbows on the counter. “What do you think of this, Rob?” She drummed her fingers on the tile and waited for a reply.
“I’m not saying a word.” Robert made a dismissive gesture with his hands. He sat down in a high chair next to Emily.

“Here,” Steve said, and he slid the eggs onto the plates in front of them and placed two pieces of toast next to the eggs. “Go ahead.”

Emily lifted the plate, closed her eyes, and smelled the eggs. She grinned and looked up at Robert then his father, then forked a small amount into her mouth. She chewed slowly. Robert tasted the eggs. He could taste the yolks over the whites as though they weren’t scrambled and the richness of butter smoothed the taste. Emily nodded.

“These may arguably be some of the best eggs I’ve ever had,” she said.

“Arguably?” Steve asked.

“That’s the best I can do,” she said.

Steve smiled. “Good enough.” He pointed to Robert’s plate. “Well?”

“Yes, Dad,” Robert said. “They’re phenomenal eggs.”

Steve stood up straight and pushed out his chest. His unbuttoned flannel shirt split open to expose a yellow, aged white t-shirt. He put his hands on his hips and smiled triumphantly.

“Everything good takes patience,” he said. “Everything.”

* * * * *

In the afternoon, Robert and Emily began to get ready to head back to the Institute in Hyde Park. Steve asked his son to take a walk with him before he left and Robert had never said no to that in his life. They left Emily packing her bag in her room and stepped out the back door into the garden. Robert followed his father past the tomato plants to the small shed where his mother had kept her gardening equipment. His father pointed at the shed as they walked by.

“I don’t know where the stupid key is,” he said.

“Hence, the digging with your hands?”

“It’s therapy either way,” his father replied. “It doesn’t matter how you do it, does it?”
“No. I guess not.”

When they reached the edge of the property behind the house, they walked under one of the large oaks that defined the property line, then turned east toward Seneca Lake. They walked quietly, stepping through dead leaves and over fallen and rotting branches. “She’s a keeper, Robbie,” his father said. He put his hands in his pockets and kicked at twigs at his feet. “If you ask me.”

Robert looked at his father’s solemn expression. His brown eyes had gone glassy and distant and his bottom lip trembled slightly.

“I know, Dad.” He put his hand on his father’s shoulder. “She’s the one I could be with.”

“Good.” His father looked him in the eyes. “Be sure.” His gaze returned to the ground. “But I can see what you mean.”

“I know,” Robert said.

At the bottom of the hill, they turned south toward the warehouse and walked away from the trees to stay in the sun. The wind and the shade chilled Robert, but the sun warmed him and made him comfortable. He thought of his father’s hands tucked tightly in the pockets of his jeans. Steve smiled.

“I’m glad you came,” he said. “Both of you.”

Robert hadn’t been sure what his father was going to do when he showed up. He knew he had to come, but he was afraid to see how his father reacted, afraid to bring Emily into a heavy situation, afraid his father would break down or yell if he saw a woman with Robert. Robert had wondered how angry his father felt, if the anger would come out on others, but everything had worked out better than he expected.

“Good,” he replied. “I’m glad too.”

Then Steve began to talk. He began slowly, saying how he was glad he didn’t have to be alone on the property the night before and how he was happy to have finally met Emily. “I want you to be happy, Robbie,” he said. “It lets me know that these things come and go, that I can keep hoping, understand?”

Robert nodded.

“I need to know this happens and people keep going.” His voice trembled. “I need to know it will all continue without her.” Robert felt confused by the acceptance in
his voice. He listened for anger and frustration in his father’s voice, but only heard complacency. “You help me understand that.” He hugged Robert and stepped back. His moist eyes peered out over the lake.

Robert looked down at his feet and shifted his weight uncomfortably. Nothing he could say would matter. He just needed to be there. Emily stood on the porch in the distance shielding her eyes and looking toward them. She had an appointment that evening with one of her cooking mentors that she knew she couldn’t miss.

“I’ll be back, Dad,” Robert said. “Soon.” He pointed up toward Emily.

Steve nodded, his smile tight. “Tell her I said it was nice to meet her.” His voice shook. “And that I said goodbye.” Robert hugged his father and stepped backward up the hill. Steve turned to walk along the edge of the property.

“Dad,” Robert yelled. His father turned to face him. “Will you go after her?” he asked.

His father put his hands on his hips and looked at the ground.

“I don’t know,” he said. He folded his arms in front of him. “Sometimes we never know what the right thing to do is until it’s too late. After we’ve made our choices.”

Robert nodded. His father turned and walked slowly down the hill beyond the warehouse to where the forest met the lake. Robert approached Emily and watched her inquisitive smile crease the corners of her eyes.
CHAPTER 13
THE AIRPORT IN NEW YORK

Robert’s friend Seth picked up Robert and Emily in New York at JFK when they had returned from their honeymoon to Italy. Robert and Emily had taken their separate flights and met at Emily’s arrival gate. Robert waited at the terminal for two hours for Emily’s plane to arrive. When she walked out of the gate entrance, Robert felt relieved. The turbulence on his flight shook the plane so much he thought the wings might shatter to pieces. He held Emily at the gate but didn’t tell her what he was thinking. He quickly motioned her to walk with him to the baggage claim. The two hour wait in the airport had shattered his nerves and he wanted to leave all his morbid thoughts and fears at the airport when they left.

Seth had been sitting on a bench at the baggage claim when they came down the escalator. He wore a dark blue pinstriped power suit and slouched back with an arm along the top of the bench. His eyes followed a group of teenage girls as they walked by carrying luggage. As Robert and Emily approached, Robert pulled Emily out of Seth’s line of sight.

“Watch,” he said. He pointed to a thin blond woman that stiffened her head as she walked by. Seth followed her with his eyes, tapped his hand on the back of the bench, stood, and followed her.

“What’s he doing?” Emily asked.

Robert moved her behind a plexi-glass information booth, leaned around the side, and watched. “Making a fool of himself,” Robert replied. Seth caught up to the woman and touched her shoulder gently. She wore a brushed suede coat with lamb fur along the seams and collar. Seth leaned closer to her and laughed. They spoke briefly before the thin woman walked off quickly without looking back. “This happens all the time, but always the smile though. Notice.”

Robert pointed.
As Seth walked back to the bench, hands in pockets, head down, a smile crept over his face, almost innocent. He sat back down, slouched, and threw his arm over the back of the bench again, his eyes scanning the crowd. He ran his hand through his short blond hair in an exaggerated movement.

Emily laughed under her breath.

“Any luck?” Robert asked as he approached.

Seth smiled in recognition but didn’t get up.

“Robert,” he said. “Depends on what you’re talking about. I can’t get the time of day from anyone at an airport. You’d think coming and going, going and coming, someone would want to meet up, no?”

“No idea, Seth.”

Emily walked up behind Robert. “Hello, Seth.”

“Emily.” Seth nodded and glanced around the room. People began to collect around the conveyor belts, the crowd moving closer to pick up their luggage when the belt began to turn. “So, the trip?” Seth asked.

“Perfect,” Robert said.

“The wine? Tell me.”

“Unbelievable Tuscans.”

“Lucky bastard. We’re going to have to have a long talk about that.” Seth pulled a pair of sunglasses out of the inside pocket of his blazer. “Did you go to the Biondi-Santi estate?”

Robert laughed. “I tasted their Brunello di Montalcino in their cellar.”

Seth shook his head.

“And the food? Did you learn anything new, Emily?”

“All secrets,” she replied. “You’ll taste them someday.” Seth stood up and hugged Emily. She smiled and walked toward the baggage claim.

Seth slid his sunglasses on. “She’s a tough one, Robert.”

“No,” Robert said. “Just to you.” Seth stood up and they followed Emily through the crowd.
Seth lived in Brooklyn and had worked in Manhattan as a Sommelier since he received his certificate almost a year before. After getting the luggage, he drove them to his apartment to stay the night. Robert had left his car in the parking garage below the building while they were away. In the morning, he and Emily would drive an hour and a half north up the Hudson River to the house they had purchased the week before they left. Seth’s apartment was a small one-bedroom flat on the eighth floor.

One wall of the main room was floor to ceiling mirrors. Seth grinned slyly as they walked into the apartment. “That should be in the bedroom,” he said, nodding to the wall of mirrors. Emily narrowed her eyes at him and elbowed Robert lightly. Out the window, Manhattan cut the jagged skyline to the west while the sun was setting. Then the city lights became all that was of the night sky.

Seth convinced Emily to cook up something light that she had learned while she was away. She laughed and began to rummage through Seth’s pantry, piling cans on the kitchen table. She decided on a special kind of gnocchi with the potatoes and flour that Seth had in his pantry. She boiled potatoes on the stove while Robert told Seth about their trip. Robert and Seth watched Emily move about the kitchen. She moved from the refrigerator to the pantry to the stove as though the kitchen were her own.

“I didn’t mean to do all this,” Seth laughed. He watched as Emily peeled the boiled potatoes, mashed them, and mixed them with flour.

“This is quick,” Emily said. Her hands where moving briskly about the floured surface of the countertop.

“I don’t believe you,” Seth said. He opened a bottle of wine.

“Quick to me may not be quick to you.”

“It certainly is not,” Seth laughed. He poured himself a glass of the wine. In the living room, Robert leaned against the cold window and watched the cars below. The
apartment was getting dark and Seth turned on a light in the kitchen. It made it harder for Robert to watch the people walking underneath the streetlights in front of the building.

Seth and Emily talked in the kitchen, but Robert looked out over the city and wondered how many Sommelier’s positions were open right then in Manhattan, how many opportunities there were for him out there in the darkness. Seth stood in the doorway of the kitchen with a glass of wine.

“Montepulciano?” he asked, holding up his glass.

“D’Abruzzo or Nobile?” Robert asked, tilting his head sarcastically.

“Nobile. Of course.”

“Prego.” Robert looked back out to the street. “How many job offers did you get when you graduated?” he called out, knowing that Seth was at the far end of the kitchen, beyond Emily. He placed his forehead against the cold glass. The early November wind blew against the window and he felt it shudder with each gust.

“Only a few,” Seth replied. He came back into the room with a large crystal glass half-filled with red wine. He handed it to Robert. “More than I expected, though.”

Robert swirled and smelled the wine. It was rich and full and reminded him of some of the wines he had smelled in Tuscany, black figs and truffles. He played with the liquid on his tongue, letting it wash over his taste buds before swallowing it and opening his mouth. The taste of dried orange peels lingered on his tongue for a moment.

“How do you still have reservations about leaving the Institute without getting your sommelier’s certificate?” Seth asked. Robert could hear Emily humming in the kitchen. He smelled the tomatoes and basil heating on the stove.

“I don’t know,” he said. He had stopped going to class to be with his father on the vineyard in Lakemont. He returned only to spend time with Emily and propose to her. He waited only one month after his mother had left to ask Emily to marry him and dismissed the thought of becoming a sommelier almost simultaneously.

Until now, he hadn’t even thought about being a sommelier since he had stopped going to the classes the year before. He only thought of Emily and his father and the land he had bought for the two of them to live on. He had convinced her to live with him on a piece of land that had once been a vineyard and he wanted to make it work again.
“You were really close to graduating, you know?” Seth held his glass out toward the city. “You had less time left than me.” The light from the kitchen caught the crystal and glimmered in Seth’s hand.

“I know.”

“You could still do it, you know?” He sipped his drink. “You closed on the house didn’t you?” Seth asked.

“Yes. Before we left.”

“Twenty acres.”

“And room to expand,” Robert replied.

“That’ll be something. Have you moved anything in yet?”

“Nothing.” Robert sipped his wine. “Only a bed.” Seth turned on the light and pointed to a magazine on the coffee table.

“What do you think of that?” he asked.

Robert sat down on the couch and picked up the issue of Food and Wine Magazine. The cover had a picture of Montreal and a bowl of mussels and a glass of white wine superimposed against the shadows of the Saint Lawrence River.

“Page fifty five.”

Robert flipped through the pages to the article about a restaurant called The Left Bank in Montreal. He read while Seth stood in the doorway of the kitchen. The restaurant was new and in the old town by the river. Robert thought of the old stone buildings that lined the water in Montreal. He and Seth had driven there numerous times, once two years before for New Year’s. The article described the location, the food, and the chef. At the end, it described the wine selection, to be hand-picked by their new sommelier, Seth Evans.

“Holy shit,” Robert said.

Seth laughed and disappeared into the kitchen. “What do you think?”

Robert took the article into the kitchen and showed it to Emily.

“Oh, Seth,” Emily began. “That’s wonderful. You’ll be living in Montreal, working at a great restaurant, all that great food, all that European culture. Just think of it.”

“I know.” Seth couldn’t contain his smile. His cheeks glowed.
“Wow,” Robert said. “When do you start?” He poured Emily another glass of wine and placed it next to her on the counter.

“I’ve already given them a preliminary list, but I have to move next week. I had to wait for you guys to get back. I had to tell you in person. First, I need to talk with the chef and the owner about the menu and about the more expensive wines.”

Robert looked out the window. Something felt safe so high above the ground, with the city in darkness, as though safe from its uncertainty. Seth looked ecstatic. He had been holding in the secret all the way from the airport. Robert imagined what the job would be like, just as he had the years before when a Sommelier was all he wanted to be. It seemed like the dream job: Montreal, wine, French Canadian culture, all less than an hour from the New York border. Seth would be in charge of one of the greatest collections of wine in the city. If he worked it right, the best. He’d be placing orders through importers, negociants, and through vineyards themselves. He’d be respected in ways that a New York winemaker never would.

It was the opulent side of wine culture, the side that Robert had never known. He almost felt jealous when he thought of Seth living in Montreal. He knew that it was an exciting time in the wine industry and Seth was going to be an essential part of it. Seth’s smile was still wide across his narrow face. Robert imagined the two of them working together in Montreal, hording a collection of the greatest wines in the world for the restaurant’s collection. It would be amazing, he realized, to be a part of something like that.

Then he thought about Emily and the house waiting for them in Kingstown. He thought about the promise he made to Emily and to himself to give it all a try. He had left the idea of becoming a Sommelier behind over a year before without hesitation and realized all he ever really wanted was a vineyard, land of his own to grow and harvest and raise his own family like his father had done in Lakemont. Montreal was Seth’s life now; his was his wife, the vineyard, and the house that overlooked the river.

He strained against the glass to look north into the darkness but only saw the yellow lights of the tenement buildings in the Bronx along the East River. Beyond that, there was only the pitch-black northern sky.
In the kitchen, he leaned over Emily’s shoulder and inhaled the scent of the sauce that was cooking on the back burner. Emily scooped a small amount on the tip of a spoon, smelled it, and lifted it to Robert’s lips. Robert closed his eyes and tried to taste every individual ingredient in the sauce the way they had taught each other. The onion and garlic came first, powerful and gritty on his tongue. Then the basil came forward and the freshness of the tomatoes lingered.

He opened his eyes and Emily stood in front of him watching his reaction. Her black hair matted out against her forehead like a Japanese fan and her eyes glimmered as she waited for him to say something. She licked her finger. Robert leaned in slowly and kissed her on the lips, then he stepped backward and sat down at the kitchen table to watch her finish creating. He drank his wine and wondered how good his first vintage would be when it was ready to drink. It would be years, he knew, but for now he had everything he wanted. There would always be time for the wine and he could always visit Seth in Montreal to be a part of that world as well.
He knelt in the middle of the empty warehouse, placed a hand on the cold pavement and tried to imagine the scent of vinegar and black cherries that would, years from now, perfume the air. The pavement was whitewashed and smooth under his fingers. High above him, a catwalk lined the edges of the rafters. He stood up and tried to picture the way the warehouse must have looked filled with lumber. The plywood probably had been in rows along the corrugated metal walls, the rest probably stacked or stored somehow down the middle. But all that was gone now and he was alone in the vacant space.

Outside, his wife was waiting for him. Robert walked back to the garage door at the front of the warehouse and pulled it down and closed from the outside. A crack in the pavement below the latch was filled with sawdust, the top layers chafing off in the breeze. Soon, he thought, there will be no hint that this was a lumber yard. It will be filled with old but good wine casks and stainless-steel vats, bottling machines, and presses. He looked around for Emily.

Their Honda was parked at the end of the gravel driveway by the mailbox. When they arrived, they had walked the property line, as he had done every day with his father back home when he was young. Now, he was three hundred miles away with his new wife at his new home and vineyard. He stepped around to the side yard and watched Emily walk slowly along the edge of thick vines and shrubs beyond the end of the warehouse. She held out her arm, hand opened, delicately brushing her palm against the vines. She looked like a young girl, he thought. Her walk was confident, her gaze far-off. She stepped high as though trying not to leave a path behind her. He jogged through the high grass of the yard to catch up to her.

“Emily,” he said, almost out of breath when he reached her. She turned and smiled, eyes wide, her black hair pulled tight behind her ears.
“We’re doing it,” she said.

“Yes.”

“This really is overgrown.” She rubbed her fingers along a leaf that hung from one of the slender vines.

“Watch out,” Robert said. “Some of these are raspberry bushes. You’ll get pricked.” He moved close to her and examined the vine she was holding. “I don’t know what that is.”

“This is going to be a lot of work for you,” she said.

“Not that bad.” He shielded his eyes from the sun and looked along the edge of the vines where the high grass met the dense dark green wall of underbrush. “Remember, only half of this has usable vines on it. From the fence at the end of the property to here.” He pointed at his feet. “The rest I can just cut right down to the ground. Then I can plant new vines.” He reached out and held her hand. “Let’s get going. My father’s waiting for us.” They began walking back to the car.

Beneath the layers of bramble behind them lay fourteen acres of Merlot vines left to be overtaken by thicket ten years before by the previous property owners. Six empty acres were left to the underbrush as well, spreading out to the back edge of the property marked by a thickly planted row of blue spruce that towered above the blanketed vines.

“But the new vines will be delicate, won’t they?”

“Yes, for a few years.” He thought of all the ways they could be damaged. How the wind could break the fragile shoots, or how the temperature could fluctuate too much and cause the vines to miss their fertilization times, or how the cold could halt their growth, or even freeze and split the roots, causing infection or killing them completely. He especially didn’t want to think about his vines freezing. He had seen the infection before. There were too many ways that viticulture could go wrong, but he had to think of all the bad things to prevent them from happening.

His father had always thought about what he could have control over, but some things he had no control over. He thought of how heavy rains could wash away the soil and expose the roots, how too much rain would cause too many grapes to grow, lowering the quality of the wine, or how too much sun could bake out the acidity of the grape,
flattening the taste. There were too many possibilities for him to worry about now, before he had even begun at all.

“How’s the warehouse?” Emily asked. She ran her fingers along the backside of a leaf she had plucked from the underbrush as she walked. “Do you still think it will work?”

“It better,” he said. “This land and the house are ours now.” He held her hand as they walked along the side of the warehouse. Her light complexion and the sunlight made her hair satin black, the color of puma fur. “I think I know where I’ll put everything.”

“Where?” she asked.

“For one,” he said. “I’ll put my father’s old bottling machine up by the front against the wall. That way, after we label the bottles, I can get them out of the warehouse and into the vault in the basement of the house.” They walked along the gravel driveway, the small stones grinding under their feet. “I’ll put the stainless-steel vats against the back, the oak barrels along the left. Something has to be created to keep everything from getting too hot in the summer.” Everything he needed had been given to him by his father, the vats, the presses, the old vineyard tractor with the narrow wheel-base that he had learned to drive down the rows of vines when he was thirteen. It was everything he had grown up using. It’s ok, he thought, my father has everything new now, there should be no guilt for taking what one of his competitors would have bought off of him anyway. His father had said it was all payment for his lifetime of help.

When they got to the car, he slipped his hands in and out of his pockets for the keys. Cars passed quickly on the road.

“Can we just look at the house one more time?” she said. “It’s so exciting.”

“OK.”

“And my new kitchen?”

“Of course.” Robert said. While they were in Italy, a contractor had remodeled the kitchen for them, tearing out the whole back half of the first floor and making it a kitchen and dining area. Emily wanted the kitchen to be as close to the centerpiece of the house as possible. Robert let her tell the contractor everything she wanted, down to a
state-of-the-art oven. He used money he and his father had made on the last vintage for a
down payment on the house.

They walked up a narrow, slate path through a wrought iron gate at the end of a
row of hedges. Ahead beyond the lawn, the old tan Victorian house stood, shaded from
the sun by two immense and tattered Oak trees. The lawn was littered with fallen
branches and dead leaves. The shaded side of the house was covered by American Ivy
that threatened to wrap around to the front of the house, where a large covered porch
sheltered two plastic lawn chairs and an empty bottle of wine on the floor between them.

Emily sat on the top step where the gray paint had been rubbed off by years of
use. He sat down next to her. At the edge of the lawn, cars slipped silently by,
silhouetted against the view of the valley. Across the street, beyond the old stone
Episcopal Church, the Hudson Valley dropped steeply through pines and thickly knotted
roots into the river. He leaned into her, bumping his shoulder against hers. She pushed
back.

“How long do you think?” she said. Her hands were drifting over the edge of her
corduroy jacket. “How long before the new vines can be harvested?” The light wind was
getting colder.

“At least three years,” he said.

“A long time.”

Not to a vineyard, he thought. He smiled and put his arm around her. “We have
that don’t we? Time?”

She nodded, her hair falling away from behind her ear. Her green eyes glistened
in the fading light. “I know I do.”

She stood up, dusted off her jeans, and unlocked and opened the front door.
Inside, newspapers covered the floors; buckets of paint lay in each room surrounded by
rollers and brushes. The scent of wet paint still lingered. The smooth wooden staircase
was in shadow just out of reach of the evening sun coming in the back windows. Robert
followed her to the kitchen, thick with the smell of fresh cut cherry and stain.

The carpenters had left small scraps of newly cut wood stacked against the wall.
The brushed steel stove glinted in the light from the window. The steel refrigerator
hummed quietly in the corner. Above the island in the middle of the room, Emily had already hung her pots and pans, their copper bases hanging low over the vegetable sink.

“Say it again,” Robert said. “Like a motor head.” He pointed at the oven. Emily laughed quietly.

“This here,” she said as she slowly rubbed her hand over the steel. “This here is the sixty inch Wolf Dual Fuel Range, gas cooktop, dual convection electric oven.”

“What can you do with that puppy?” Robert leaned against the island in the middle of the kitchen and folded his arms.

“Well, basically anything humanly possible.” Emily put her elbows on the counter as though she was leaning over the engine of a car. “It’s all right here.” She tapped the glass of the oven door. “She’s all you’ll ever need.”

Robert laughed. Emily had seemed to have always known almost everything there was to know about cooking. Even at The Culinary Institute she seemed to know more than her teachers. She spoke out when they were wrong, changed recipes when she thought her way was better, submitted food that she had made her own way which appeared the same as everyone else’s, yet Robert thought hers always tasted better. Emily stuck her tongue behind her lip to make it look like she was chewing tobacco.

“Yup,” she said. “That’s it.”

It had become late afternoon and they decided to head back to Lakemont on Seneca Lake, where his father was waiting for them at his house. Tomorrow, they would load up his father’s old equipment in Mr. Andrew’s truck and trailer and haul everything here, to the new warehouse. But now his father waited for them to celebrate Nouveau.

Since Robert was little, every year his family celebrated a French tradition of the harvest of the vintage for Beaujolais Nouveau. His father made sure that each year the family came together, the third Thursday of each November, to have dinner and sample the wines before they entered the next stage of fermentation. He remembered the year before, right after his mother had left, when he and his father sat together in the warehouse at the small wooden table, and slowly sampled the wines. He remembered that his father didn’t speak much that night, and they ate quietly, though the wine had so much character they both knew it was the best they had ever made.

Robert and Emily locked up the house and walked back to the car.
“So what do you think?” he asked. He opened the passenger side door for her.

“I think I’m in love with everything.” She kissed him on the cheek and slipped into the car. He shut her door and slowly walked around the back of the car, looking from the house to the warehouse to the vines beyond. He breathed deep and smelled the rosemary bushes that grew up against the mailbox. He felt calm and happy, knowing that he had time to make everything work out. He had enough money from the family’s last few vintages to be well off for a year or two. By then, Emily would have a good job in Poughkeepsie, Kingston, or New Paltz and they would be ok again for a while. She would be working toward her own restaurant, saving money on the side. He had time, he thought, time to help her through everything, time to work on the vineyard. Time was the one thing they both needed.

He climbed into the Honda and kissed Emily on the cheek, then on the forehead.

“What was that for?” she asked. She blushed.

“Nothing.”

He started the engine.
Three hours later, they pulled up the long winding gravel driveway at dusk, the headlights shining on the rows of vines around them at every turn. The house crested the top of a hill at the end of the driveway and the dark logs of the house stretched across beneath and above the giant picture window that looked out over Seneca Lake in the valley to the east.

The small ranch stood atop the hill exposed to the wind which usually blew the snow clean off the land and into the vines and trees down the hill. When Robert opened the car door, the crisp November air cut through his flannel shirt and numbed the inside of his nose. Emily arose quickly from the car, holding herself tightly and rubbing her upper arms.

“Let’s get inside,” she said. Her teeth glimmered as she smiled. “You ready?” He reached into the back seat, pulled out a windbreaker, and gave it to her.

“No,” he said. “Will you walk with me?”

“Of course.”

He hadn’t stayed in the house overnight yet since the summer. It was quieter now and only reminded him of everything his mother had taken with her the day she had left.

They walked across the driveway to the edge of the field where below, the pond created a long kidney-shaped opening among the vines like a wound among the orderly rows. They could see almost all of the vines to the east, rising thick and healthy from the cold soil. Robert knew these vines were only about fifteen years old, planted after the first stock of vines split and died that winter years ago because of the unusually long cold spell and subsequent infection.

It was a harsh winter and the stems and roots split apart, destroying any chance for the vines to produce grapes healthy enough to be harvested for wine. They had lost not only the harvest, but most of the vines themselves. Almost everything had to be
replaced, putting the family into debt for those three years. It was only in the past few years that they had completely recovered. Everything was lost but the small patch on the eastern edge of the property that now rose strong and thick above the other vines, like a threatening reminder of their fragility. Robert and Emily walked down one of the rows of trained vines.

“I used to get up early before school and walk with my Dad along the edge of our property.”

“I know.”

He pointed over the pond. “The land ends an acre or so beyond the trees.”

“I know.” She nudged him with her elbow and smiled. “Why doesn’t your Dad use that land to plant vines on?”

“This is probably too much for him.” Robert knelt down over a vine stem and reattached a piece of wire to one of the shoots, lifting it up and laying it gently over the trellis. “He can’t go through the field and do all this without us to help him.”

The warehouse sat at the bottom of the hill, a maroon blur against the forest. He knew his father never kept it locked.

“Who does he have to help him now that you and your mother are gone?” They walked around the side of the warehouse to a solitary door under a yellow light.

“When my mother and I were here, Mr. and Mrs. Andrews always volunteered. Sometimes we needed more people so we had temporary help. Mr. and Mrs. Andrews always help. I’m sure they’ll be around.” He opened the side door and turned on the lights.

Mr. and Mrs. Andrews owned the country store in town. It was a small shop, kept so by the zoning ordinances, to appear quaint and rural for the tourists who come to see the wine country. Beyond groceries they sold wine knick-knacks, obscure olive oils and pesto sauces, organic vegetables and expensive local wines. Without such things, they told Robert, they would have gone under years ago for not being quaint enough to appeal to the tourists.

“It’s even colder in here,” Emily said. Robert walked into the center of the open room between the rows of stainless-steel tanks that rose like ancient towers along the
edges of the room. At the far end of the warehouse, around a small wooden table, four chairs lay strewn about the floor on their backs.

“We used to sit there.” He motioned to the table. “And my mother, my father and I would sample the wines before anyone else.” He remembered how his father would sit them down, place glasses in front of them, and disappear for a long time before returning with carafes of red and white wine. His father would grind his teeth as he poured the white wine into their glasses. Then, they would each swirl the light saffron-colored liquid and hold their glasses up to the buzzing florescent lights, studying for sediment and impurities. His father always reminded them never to judge it on the first sip. After tasting both the white and red samples, they would sit and drink what was left in the carafes, talking and laughing, eyes glossed over from relief and their shared love of wine.

“Robert,” Emily said. “I think I want to go in. I’m freezing.” She had the windbreaker pulled tight around her slender arms, pinching it up in front of her with her small hands. Robert rearranged the chairs around the table. He pushed each chair into place perfectly before turning to Emily.

“OK,” he said. He adjusted the fourth chair against the table and brushed the seat with his hand, sweeping off a thick layer of dust that he padded off onto his jeans. “I’m ready now.”

Robert’s father stood motionless in the doorway when they walked back up to the house, his grey hair jutting out, falling just slightly over the collar of his flannel shirt. Robert and Emily walked quietly up the gravel driveway, Robert’s arm rapped tightly around Emily’s shoulder.

“Hello, Steve,” Emily said. Robert could see his father was smiling.

“Emily,” Steve said. “How’s my son holding up his end of the bargain?” He walked down the steps and hugged Emily.

“Nothing to complain about yet,” she replied, tapping Robert on the arm. “But then again, it’s only been a month.” They laughed.

Robert shook his father’s hand and motioned toward the door.

“Emily’s very cold,” he said.

“Of course,” Steve said. “Excuse me.” He smiled at Emily.
Inside, Robert noticed that the house had changed since they had been there a little over a month before. Many of the pictures in the hall had been taken down. Every frame that held a picture of his mother had been removed and placed in a pile at the side of the couch in the living room. The kitchen was filled with plywood and two-by-fours stacked against the walls. The house smelled of sawdust.

“What are you doing, Dad?” Robert looked around the rest of the house, moving from room to room, each one displaying some kind of radical change. The bathroom had been painted blue and a new curtain hung over the shower basin. “I could have sworn I was just here and everything was fine.”

“Everything was fine,” his father said.

“What are you doing?”

“Starting over again,” Steve said. “I thought it was about time.”

“I thought you had already done that,” Robert said. “Mom’s been out of here for what, a year, almost a year and a half?” He shuffled through the pile of pictures on the floor by the couch.

“Well.” Steve said. He stood over Robert. His face looked heavy in the dim light of the living room, the wrinkles under his eyes entrenched black lines. “She never really left this house, you know?”

Robert stood up.

“Right.”

“Have you talked to her lately?” his father asked. He motioned to a coffee maker on the counter in the kitchen. Emily nodded.

“About once a week.” Robert said. The corners of Steve’s lips turned up a bit and he nodded. He filled the top of the coffee maker with grounds. Robert talked to her less than that, but he thought it would make his father feel better if he thought she and Robert had a good relationship.

“Have you talked to her since you got back from your honeymoon?”

“No,” Robert replied. They had been back for less than a week.

“She’s good?” Steve asked.

“Yeah, she’s good.”
“Still in Mendocino?” Steve filled the glass pot up with water at the sink and poured it into the reservoir at the back of the coffee maker. It had been just over a year since she had walked out and moved to northern California to take a job as a winemaker and chemist in the Mendocino valley. Her reasons were left between her and his father. Neither one told Robert more than simple clichés about failed marriages. They said people change, things get complicated, life moves you along, but nothing that Robert really understood or could put a finger on as a real problem, something worth splitting up over.

“Yeah, still working with the Shiloh Winery, I think.” Robert knew that the Shiloh Winery was the most prestigious and advanced in northern California. His father knew it too.

Steve looked out the kitchen window over the sink into the darkness of the back yard. “You know I’m planting Chardonnay back there?”

“I should go in with you and buy some for our place,” Robert said. “We’re going to do about six acres of white, you know?”

“Maybe you should do more,” Steve said. He sat down at the kitchen table. “You know how New York is with Chardonnay. Or Riesling.” Robert nodded and looked at the floor. “You haven’t called your mother since you got back from your honeymoon?”

“No.”

“She’s probably worried.”

Robert had his doubts. “I know,” he said.

Emily sat down across from Robert’s father, put her hands in the pockets of her jacket, and looked out the sliding glass door into the yard. She looked tired.

Robert could smell the French vanilla coffee brewing in the coffee maker. He knew his father still cared for his mother. Robert could see it in his eyes when he talked about her. There was a distant recognition that flashed across his face if only for a second, as though he was almost happy to talk about her. Though the ever present memories of her that littered the house must have been overkill for him. Robert realized that it was probably for the best that she had taken everything she did when she had left. If she hadn’t, too many things would have reminded his father of her. He would probably
have been even more sick with heartache, wondering if she would come back to collect her things, even if it was just once.

“How was it anyway?” his father asked. “Italy?”

“It was everything to us,” Robert said. “The food was unbelievable and the wines have to speak for themselves. I brought you back a few bottles.” His father nodded.

“I have pictures,” Emily said. “They’re in the car.” She gave a shy look toward Robert, silently asking him if it was all right to continue. Robert just smiled. “I can get them if you want to see them.” She stood up.

“Absolutely,” Steve said. He walked to the sink and poured himself a cup of coffee. “I’m always in the mood for pictures.”

Emily hustled out of the kitchen to get the pile of hundreds of photos they had taken of the past three weeks. Robert thought about the pictures. They had both taken so many pictures he wondered if he would be able to remember where and when each one was taken. The trip had been a blur of happiness. He couldn’t have been more ecstatic that they were together almost the whole time. There was something simple and honest and innocent about their last three weeks together.

Robert hoped that taking the pictures didn’t make him look like a tourist. He hated being a tourist. He thought it felt cheap and insincere to take pictures of things that tourists would take pictures of. Each photo was an attempt at an intimate look at his perception of the world. Most of the pictures of Emily were impulsive and spontaneous, catching her when she seemed least concerned that he carried a camera. And the pictures showed the happiest of moments together. The photos suggested more than Robert’s father would understand, and maybe more than Robert himself understood about what she meant to him. His mother would have liked Emily, he thought. She loved pictures of vacations in distant places and would have loved to have Emily talk her through each one. But that was irrelevant now and he moved to the window over the sink to look out over the yard.
“How’s your father?” she asked. Robert switched the phone from his right ear to his left and leaned over the sink to look out the window.

“He’s out in the yard,” he said. His mother said nothing. “He’s always outside, though.”

Emily sat at the kitchen table watching Robert talk to his mother on the phone. He knew his father was really down at the warehouse running final checks on the vats of wine, so that in the morning they would start bottling. He didn’t want to talk to his mother about what day it was. It would bring up memories of the three of them tasting the wine together. It was impossible that she didn’t know what day it was, but if she didn’t mention it, he wasn’t going to.

“Is he expanding the size of the vineyard?” she asked. Her voice was raspy and nasal.

“Do you have a cold, Mom?”

“I’m just not used to this weather,” she said. Emily shuffled in her chair at the table, motioned to Robert that she wanted to know what he was talking about. She watched how he reacted to the conversation. He tried to look stoic. “The size?” his mother asked.

“He’s adding Chardonnay behind the house,” he said. He turned from the window and sat back against the counter, untwisting the old coiled phone cord then letting it twist itself back up into a knot. “As many acres as he can fit, I imagine.”

“So my garden’s gone?” she asked. Robert said nothing. “I suppose that’s a good thing. It should give him something more to do.”

Robert wanted to pry. He wanted to ask her why she really left, what went wrong between them so quickly while he was away. “And your new house? How is that?”

Before he left for Manhattan and the Culinary Institute, they seemed fine, working every
morning the way they had been working since he was a small boy. Before that, his
mother had to stay in the house and take care of him, but once he could walk, they took
him with them, tracing row by row the vines they owned, maintaining the short, wide
canopies of grape leaves that stretched out to catch the sun.

The vine shoots and leaves towered over Robert’s head when he was small,
keeping him shaded from the sun. His mother had always sat him down against the stems
or the support posts, given him a bunch of grapes, and told him to be patient and sit still
while they cut back the leaves to expose the grapes to the sun. Sometimes they trimmed
back the leaves to let the sun hit the grapes; other times they rewired the trellis to hold up
the shoots better. There was always something that could be done and they taught Robert
all of it. By sitting and watching in his youth, he learned to understand how to care for
the vines. There was gentleness in their hands when they laid the delicate shoots along
the wire, like resting silk to dry on a thin thread.

“The house is fine, Mom. You should come see it.” There was silence on the
other end of the line.

“Oh, Robert. You know I can’t do that.” She said it softly; Robert imagined that
she held the phone away from her mouth as she spoke, maybe as though the connection
was failing. Emily walked to the sliding glass door that overlooked the backyard and
pointed, her index finger touching the glass.

At the far end of the rows of grapes, his father stood motionless, the untucked
ends of his flannel shirt flapping in the wind. His mother kept talking quietly about how
she didn’t have the money or the means to get out of Mendocino County for a while.
When they divorced months after she left, she came back and took only her car and some
money she had saved. She had left the whole vineyard to Steve, even though she could
have battled over it in court. It was the one thing Robert had respected her for doing.

“I understand, Mom,” he said. When he talked to her the last time over a month
ago, she sounded excited that he was going to Italy and said she wanted to hear all about
it when they returned, but now she didn’t ask one question, and stayed in silence on the
other end of the line as though there was nothing left to say to her son. Emily pointed at
herself and then outside to let Robert know that she was going to join his father. Robert
nodded. “Listen,” he began. “Can I call you later on? This is a busy time of the season, you know?” He slipped. His mother knew what he meant.

It was the third Thursday in November, the day of the Beaujolais Nouveau, the day of family tradition, of new beginnings, celebrated harvests, family, everything he didn’t want to bring up in conversation with his mother. He heard her sigh quietly. His father always had the celebration with family and friends, the sampling of the wine after the first stage of fermentation, when it still had a sweeter, fruity flavor, before the final fermenting in the bottle. They sampled the wines from the family’s vintage, then bought bottles of Beaujolais Nouveau from the Andrews’s grocery to finish off the celebration. It felt wrong not to talk to his mother about the celebration, the day, the wine, but he didn’t want to hurt her. Or maybe he didn’t want to anger himself.

“Of course,” she said. “I’ve got the same out here.” He pictured her in some vast, dark, foreign warehouse sampling wine among strangers in some corporate winery. He knew she wouldn’t work in a place like that, but her job title was vague and she spoke little of her life over the past year.

“Goodbye, Mom.”

“OK, Robert, I’ll call you next time,” she said. She giggled but then stopped herself, the voice cutting out quickly as though she had put her hand over the phone. “Goodbye.”

His father was standing in the exact place he had been before. Emily was standing next to him, their two silhouettes against the dark waters of Seneca Lake. He saw their lips moving occasionally, but the sound was carried off by the cold wind. His father looked down at the ground and toyed with the soil with his boot, mumbling something softly to Emily. As Robert approached, Steve stopped talking. He seemed to talk to her more about Robert’s mother than he would talk to Robert. Emily turned to Robert and smiled. Her pale cheeks were blotched with bright red patches from the wind. She had her hands deep in her pockets and used them to wrap her jacket even tighter around her small body.

“Are you ready to celebrate?” she asked. His father folded his arms across his chest.
“I know I am,” Steve said, with a weak smile. “But we won’t be having any guests this year. Except for you, of course,” he said to Emily. He looked out over the lake. In the summer, the waters seemed brighter and were covered with small white dots, sailboats mooring near vineyards, tourists traveling the wine-route by boat. Now, the dark water glistened like motor oil. Emily looked at Robert intently, her smile still digging into her cheeks.

“I’m going to cook us something grand,” she said. Robert zipped up his windbreaker and pulled his sweatshirt hood up over his ears. “What would you like, honey?” she asked. “What would go good with this wine?”

Robert looked at his father, who was kicking the ground again with his boot. He walked up to him, looked down over the land that dropped to the lake, and said, “I think we should let her decide, don’t you?”

His father exhaled through a smile, as though warming his teeth. “Yeah,” he said. “We don’t need a perfect match tonight.” Emily hopped softly with her feet together, trying to warm up.

“OK,” she said. “I’ll go into town to get what I need.” With that, she turned quickly and moved in between the vines to the back of the house.

“Make sure you get everything at Andrew’s Country Store,” Robert yelled. “And invite them while you’re there.” Emily stuck her thumb up in the air without turning around and disappeared into the house.

Robert stood with his father, the wind cutting across their backs as they looked out to the east. The hills beyond the lake were growing darker as the sunlight slid its way up and out of the valley.

“I talked to Mom just now, like you mentioned,” Robert said. His father nodded. “Yup.” His messy gray hair tussled in the breeze. “Emily told me.” Robert wasn’t surprised.

“She likes you,” Robert said.

“Well,” his father began, “She’s in our lives for good now.” He stopped. He turned and looked toward the sun setting between two young pines. “Like I said before, she’s definitely a keeper, Robbie.” The wind let up. He put his hands in the back pockets of his jeans. “Come on,” he said. “Let’s go check the warehouse.” He brushed
past his son and walked down the narrow path that ran along the eastern edge of the vineyard before disappearing behind the tallest and oldest of the vines, the ones that Steve had saved from infection.
The warehouse was colder in the heavy darkness. Steve pulled at a clipboard that hung on the wall and a pencil slid off and dangled from it by a string. He walked from steel tank to steel tank, recording temperatures and reading the many gauges that lined the tanks and the walls. Robert followed behind him. He looked at each dial and gauge after his father stepped away. He knew the precise temperatures that they needed to be to ferment perfectly. He knew that by keeping the white wines in the steel tanks, the colder temperatures would inhibit the yeast just enough to make the wine more complex. His father knew the temperatures even better. He even knew the best yeasts for those temperatures, how they would react and how long it would take before they killed themselves off. When they reached the oak casks at the back of the warehouse beyond the small wooden table, Steve stopped writing on the clipboard.

“You know I meant it when I said Emily is a keeper, right?” He turned to face Robert. His eyes sat back deeply between the heavy lines at their corners.

“Yeah, Dad,” Robert replied. He motioned to the table. “You want to sit down?”

His father nodded.

“Your mother is a keeper too.” He sat down. “It’s just that…”

“What, Dad?” It was the first time that he had even begun to try to explain anything about Robert’s mother.

“It’s just that now, she’s not a keeper for me. At least not anymore.”

“I don’t understand.” Robert wanted to ask his father why he didn’t chase after her, follow her to California and try to get her back, but he hesitated. His father struggled to speak.

“I don’t know if you can, Robbie. I mean, I’m not a keeper for her either now. Before, yes. Our whole lives together, yes, but now, where I want to be and where she
wants to be… They’re two different places.” He dug his thumbnail into the soft wood on
the table.

Different places, Robert thought, didn’t mean different lives. “How can you say
that?” he said. “Aren’t you supposed to change together, isn’t that what marriage is?”
“For the most part, yes.”

Robert stood up quickly. “Then what? What happened to trigger this?” He
walked among the dark oak casks, tracing his fingers along the grooves of the metal
bands.

“Some seed was planted, I guess, though I’m not sure. Something that made her
want a different life.”

“You didn’t argue a lot, did you?”

“Hardly ever.”

Robert thought back to the last time he lived at home when they had still been
together. It was over three years before and he was gone most of the time finishing up a
degree in food service in Ithaca forty minutes to the east. His mother and father talked
softly then. In retrospect, it seemed as though they had fallen into monotony, years of
working the same land together had made them quiet. But the quietness had come long
before, when he was much younger. He thought of the times they had almost lost their
yield, and the times they did. Most of all, he thought of the time they lost the vines to the
cold. So much seemed to have died that night, the night the pond was as dark as the
starless sky and the ice, shattered and jagged, cut a hole in his memory.

“I don’t know what to say,” his father whispered. “That’s all of it.” He stood up
and pushed his chair in. “Let go back up to the house and taste the wine.”

Robert followed him out the door and up the hill in the dark. In his pocket he
picked at his corkscrew, thumbing the metal spiral screw and rubbing the mahogany body
with his fingers. It was one of the best corkscrews on the market, the wood cut from trees
on a vineyard in northern France, and he usually kept it on him in place of a pocket knife.
Robert could feel the frost coming on in the air. It lingered strongly along the inside of
his nose the way memory sometimes lingers there. He watched his father rub his hands
together nervously as they walked.
CHAPTER 19
A CELEBRATION OF HARMONY

When they returned to the house an hour had passed and Emily stood in the kitchen at the sink. The scent of seafood hung about the house. Robert’s father shut the front door behind them and blew into his hands to warm them.

“What did you decide?” he asked Emily. She moved from the sink to the oven.

“Spaghetti with olives and capers, baked cod with garlic mayonnaise, and ricotta cheesecake for dessert.” She slid the cheesecake out of the refrigerator, placed it on the ceramic tile center island, and wiped her forehead. “What do you think?”

“I think she’s a keeper,” Steve said. He tapped his son on the shoulder as they walked into the kitchen. “How can you do all that?” he asked Emily.

“As quickly as possible,” she said. “And I cheated a little. I didn’t make the crust.”

“Why don’t I go back down to the warehouse and get the first batch of wine?” Steve walked back to the front door. Robert realized that they had forgotten to bring it up from the warehouse.

“Oh, and the Andrews are joining us for dinner.”

“Great,” Steve said. “I’ll be right back.”

“Don’t sample it without us,” said Robert.

“I wouldn’t dare.” Then his father closed the front door behind him and left Robert and Emily alone in the kitchen. Robert watched Emily move around the kitchen from the hallway.

“Thanks for cooking,” he said. She cocked her head to the side.

“That’s what I do.”

Robert moved the piles of two-by-fours and plywood away from the table so that they could sit comfortably. He laid everything in the living room on the carpet.

“Did he talk to you out there?” Robert asked.
“Yes.” She stood at the counter over a pan filled garlic, capers and olives.
“What did he say about her?” Robert sat down.
“He didn’t really talk about her.” With the fork, she raised the food to her mouth, closed her eyes, and inhaled, before tasting the sauce. “He talked more about how he was doing.”
“And is he ok?”
“Yes. I guess he finally thinks it’s time to start over.” She poured dried spaghetti into a pot of boiling water on the stove and pulled the cod out of the oven placing it on the table. While Robert and his father were out, she had set the table for five with two wine glasses and a water glass in front of each place.
“I’m glad he talks to someone about it,” Robert said.
“What did he say while I was gone?” She inhaled deeply over the fish.
“Nothing new, really.” He hugged her from behind as she stood against the island. “But as long as he’s ok, I don’t care who he talks to.”
“Taste this,” she said. She raised a forkful of olives and capers to his lips. “But close your eyes.” Robert closed his eyes and Emily fed it to him. He moved it around in his mouth, the richness of the olive oil coated his tongue and he tasted garlic, anchovies, olives and capers all at once, at different level, like the layers of wine.
“That’s great,” he said, and he kissed her on the cheek.
“He’s going to be fine, Robert. He has all the time in the world.”
“Right,” he replied. “Perhaps that part of his life is over.”
When Steve returned with the wine, he told them that he had stopped by Andrew’s Grocery earlier and picked up a few bottles of Beaujolais Nouveau to sample after they sampled their wine. That was part of the tradition.
Moments later there was a knock on the door. Before anyone could react, the door opened and Mr. and Mrs. Andrews shuffled in talking loudly to each other.
“Well I’m not paying for cans that were rotten when we got them,” Mr. Andrews said, his voice huffing awkwardly from the cold. “They can call the distributor.”
“Do whatever you want,” Mrs. Andrews began. “We’ll just lose the store, that’s all.” She wheezed under her breath.
“I won’t lose the store.”
“Honey, shush. We’re here.” In a moment, they were both in the kitchen holding bags of groceries, shuffling about shaking hands and kissing Emily on the cheek. Mr. Andrews slouched terribly, yet his height made him appear normal. His hair flipped straight up in the front, like a wind-lip of snow, and the hair at the back of his head spiraled around in curls. Mrs. Andrews still wore her apron from the shop, its blue and white checkers soiled from produce and stocking shelves. Robert had never been able to guess her age. From his earliest memories, she seemed the same: gray bouffant hair, apron, small stubby fingers that shucked corn and shelled peanuts like a squirrel. She was the closest thing he had to a grandmother, both of his had died before he was born, one in the U.S. the other in France.

“Sit down and rest,” Emily said, happily. “It’ll only be a minute.”

They sat down at the table and Steve poured them each a glass from the carafe of white, then one of red in their second wine glasses. He raised his white wine above his plate.

“Are we ready?” he asked.

Emily giddily sat down with them.

“To the next year,” Steve said. “May it be even better than the last.” He had said the same toast since Robert could remember.

“To next year,” Emily said. She smiled at Robert who held his glass up. Mr. and Mrs. Andrews held their glasses up and smiled at each other.

They tasted the white for a few moments in silence.

“Not bad,” Steve said. “Not amazing, but not bad at all.” Robert thought it tasted lean and crisp. It was good for a New York Chardonnay, that much he knew.

“This is good, Dad.”

His father smiled. “It’s always good,” he said.

Then they sampled the Cabernet Sauvignon and Robert liked it even better. Steve said it had a small amount of Merlot in it as well. He said that before he bottled it, he might add a wine from a previous vintage to give it more character. It was something that his father had rarely done in the past, but he saw the change in his father. He was bolder now, ready to make risky changes in the wine that he wouldn’t have made in the
past. Robert could see it in his eyes, a liberating edge that hadn’t been there in a long
time, not since the infected vines had died.

Robert loved red wine more than white. It was heavier and more powerful, easier
for him to decipher, but he knew that the whites were better in New York. He wanted to
grow just red back on his land though he knew it would be easier to sell a Chardonnay or
Riesling. His father’s reds were always good. This one was one of the best. Sometimes
Robert thought they were the best in the Finger Lakes but his father never advertised as
much as other companies did. It was one of his flaws. He said that if he made good
wine, it wouldn’t matter how much he advertised because good wine sells itself. Robert’s
mother didn’t agree, but she never argued her point.

When they ate, they started with the spaghetti and then had the baked cod. While
they were eating the cod they ran out of the wine from the carafes, so Steve opened a
bottle of Beaujolais Nouveau.

“Do you know why this is tradition?” he asked. Robert had told Emily that every
year his father told the story. “Our family is from south of Lyon in France.”

Mr. Andrews poured each person a glass and leaned forward in anticipation of the
story. “Well?” he said, impatiently. “Get on with it, Steve. I’m old and too aware of
time passing.” He held his glass up to toast. “Anyway, to time passing,” he said, and
clinked his glass against everyone’s at the table.

Robert took a sip of the wine. He had always liked Beaujolais. It was the first
wine he had ever tasted and it was a good first wine for anyone who didn’t know what
wine tasted like.

“Our family sold much of our wine as Beaujolais Nouveau and would float it
down the river in casks to Lyon before this day every year. Most of our family’s money
came from this. All over France they would celebrate the year’s harvest and our wine
would be a part of it. Without it, my father and mother wouldn’t have been able to come
here to start a new life together. They would have stayed in France and worked on the
vineyard with my grandparents, who sold the land soon after to a negociant. Now it’s
made into better wine by a bigger company, but it is still part of our heritage. We’ve
always celebrated the harvest on the third Thursday of November.”

“But you don’t make Beaujolais,” Emily said, toying with Robert’s father.

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“No, but it’s in our blood.” His eyes glowed with the wide-eyed happiness that comes with drinking wine. “Just like this wine is in mine.” He held up his glass.

“Well I never knew, Steven,” Mrs. Andrews said. “Everyone gets this wine and I never knew why.” Her thick little fingers wrapped themselves around her glass. “It was always my favorite.” She took a sip.

Robert sat back in his chair. He watched as Emily and his father talked to Mr. and Mrs. Andrews across the table. They smiled and leaned over their plates, their head’s somewhat heavy from the wine, their smiles broad and loose. It was the first time he saw his father smile like that in over a year. It was good to have other people with them this year to celebrate the vintage. It was good to have Mr. and Mrs. Andrews to brighten up the conversation with something different. Their argumentative dialogs were endearing the more he thought about them. It lightened the mood. Most of all, he thought it was good to have Emily there. Someone needed to be there to take his mother’s place at the table, someone needed to make his father smile. He knew he wouldn’t have been able to do it on his own, and his father wasn’t ready to date again. Emily bridged that gap. His father’s happiness seemed vicarious through Robert’s love for Emily.

They talked about France and Burgundy and Beaujolais for a while and Steve talked about his parents to the Andrews. After the cheesecake, the conversation became sparse and Mr. and Mrs. Andrews said goodbye. They agreed to meet Robert and Emily in the morning at the store to lend them their truck. When they had left, Emily stretched silently and said she was tired. Steve and Robert sat at the table finishing off the last of the bottle of wine, but Emily rose to leave. She kissed Steve on the forehead before kissing and holding Robert briefly.

“I love you,” she said. “This was great.” Robert smiled and whispered back. Then Emily disappeared and could be heard running the water in the bathroom and brushing her teeth in the back of the house before going into Robert’s old bedroom to go to sleep.

“How does she like the house?” Robert’s father asked. He got up and poured himself a cup of coffee.

“She loves it.” Robert said. Steve asked about her cooking, about where she would get a job as a chef so far away from any big cities. “She’ll probably work in
Kingston or New Paltz or Poughkeepsie,” Robert said. “There are a few places that are almost good enough for her talent.”

Steve nodded.

“I suppose,” he said. “Just make sure she’s happy wherever she goes.”

Robert nodded. “She wants a restaurant of her own.”

Steve smiled. “Wonderful,” he said. “And you’re ok with that?”

Robert nodded again. “Of course.”

“Good.” Steve walked out the sliding glass door into the back yard. “I’m going to work on the vines.”

“You work at night?” Robert asked.

“These days I work whenever,” Steve said. “I don’t sleep well anyway.” He slid the door closed and disappeared into the yard. Robert walked through the house and turned all the lights out except the one above the sink in the kitchen, leaving it on to guide his father back into the house when the cold became too great for the poor circulation in his hands.
The next day Robert and Emily drove south into town to the Andrew’s Country Store to pick up the truck that they were going to use to move the equipment from Lakemont to Kingston. The store was a large Italianate home that had been turned into a hotel sometime in the early thirties. The pine green wooden shingles had faded and chipped from the harsh weather, but the giant wooden sign, which Mr. Andrews painted a different brown each year, hung low over the porch.

For the past five years he had forgotten to redrill the sign into the six-by-six beams along the porch. Robert and Emily found him inside kneeling by the check out counter nailing a piece of rotted trim back into place along the floor.

“Welcome,” he said, without looking up. A bald spot glistened through the thin gray hair he had wearily tried to comb over it. Mrs. Andrews came walking from the back of the store. Her short, wide figure waddled rhythmically almost touching the isles of food at her sides as she walked. She still looked somewhere around seventy years old, but that’s what he thought of her his whole life. She smiled revealing unnaturally white teeth.

“We get to see you again so soon.” Mrs. Andrews said. She too was short, not more than five feet tall, the bouffant windblown and flattened to one side. Her old checkered apron was stained with soil and her jeans underneath were messy. Behind the shop, they had a garden where they grew most of their own vegetables and fruits and whenever it was really slow, one of them would disappear and work in the garden. They used aprons to hide the fact that they had been out back digging through the soil. Mrs. Andrews had loved Emily from the moment they met the day before the wedding. Her hive of hair bounced as she shuffled up to hug Emily. “Hello again.”
Mr. Andrews looked up. “Well,” he began. “I guess I was expecting you.” He rose slowly to his feet supporting himself against the counter. He looked up at Robert. “Up late?” he asked.

“Not at all,” Emily said.

“That dinner was wonderful,” said Mrs. Andrews.

“Thank you.”

Mrs. Andrews smiled anxiously. “You’re a wonderful cook.”

“Again, thank you.” Emily covered her mouth with her hand.

“Well,” Mr. Andrews began. He rubbed the back of his head, the thin hair flopping out of place. “You need to get moving, don’t you?” He motioned them out the door and led them outside to a large white truck parked along the side of the building. The side of the store was sheltered from the cold wind that shook the heavy brown sign above them. Mr. Andrews scuffed his way along the gravel in front of them, slouched somewhat, but head held high above his curving back like a duck.

“This is her,” he said. He tapped the hood with his hand. It was a Ford F-150 with a large flatbed trailer attached. “Will she do?”

Robert walked along the length of the trailer and thought about the size of the vats, and the bottling machine. “Of course,” he said. Emily smiled and folded her arms in front of her, her scarf rustling loose in the breeze. Robert knew that he would only need to make one trip with the trailer. Everything they in the warehouse that they needed to move would fit between Mr. Andrews’s truck and trailer and his father’s truck.

Mr. Andrews smiled up at the sky. “O good day to move,” he said. Te cumulous clouds above them moved slowly through an turquoise sky. “We’ll come see the house soon.” He dragged his feet back along the gravel and up onto the porch. “Congratulations again.” His hopeful smile reminded Robert of his father’s when he was younger, when he had just begun the vineyard. “Have it back in a few days.” He disappeared into the store. Robert started the truck up and followed Emily back to the house in Lakemont to load it up with all the equipment that was waiting packed up and piled just inside the warehouse.
Two hours later, Emily was following Robert down the highway in Robert’s father’s old pickup truck. Robert could only see her in his side view mirrors because the large stainless steel vats lay in his way on the flatbed and trailer behind him. They drove for the two hours along route seventeen through the Catskills and along the Beaverkill River, which curved its way back and forth underneath them every few miles. Robert remembered when he was younger, in the spring, when there was little to do on the vineyard but wait, his father took him fly-fishing along the Beaverkill. He couldn’t remember where exactly. Every bend in the river looked somewhat familiar. He felt he could almost remember standing on some of the smooth rocks in the center of the river, casting to some shaded edge that his father had directed him toward.

The farther east he drove along the river, the more subtly familiar the river became. He had always taken route seventeen back and forth from home to Manhattan, Kingston to home, but had never driven slowly enough to look out off of the bridges as they drove over the river.

It was too late in the year, he thought, for anyone to be fishing, but it would have been nice to see someone out there wading in the water, casting line into one of the ripples that trailed behind the rocks projecting out of the water. He couldn’t remember the last time he had gone fly-fishing. It would have been with his father and it would have had to have been ten years ago at least, but it was somewhere close, perhaps beyond one of the bends that cut away and moved along the valley to the south, somewhere he would remember only when he stepped out of the car and walked down to the river, where only the stones would be the same as they had been years before.

Emily flashed her high beams to signal him to pull over. At a Sonoco, Robert pulled the truck up along the side of the road and climbed out. Emily parked at the front doors and motions with her hand that she needed to go inside. She put her knees together
and put her hands down as though she had to use the bathroom. Robert nodded and waited at the truck, looking around at the small town trying to find something familiar in the air. It was much warmer than the night before.

The sun broke free from the clouds occasionally and shot the temperature up enough to be comfortable in just a sweatshirt. Robert looked down the road past the exit ramp of the throughway to a small access road that led down to the river. He thought that maybe one day soon, he’d stop and fish there, or at least pull off the throughway some time and search for the spots he used to go to with his father. Emily came back out of the gas station and came over to Robert walking on light steps. She grinned.

“How’s it going?” she asked.

“Good,” Robert said. Emily moved up close to him and he put his arms around her. They held each other in the light wind which blew Emily’s hair up and into his face. He coughed and laughed and stepped back, spitting down at the ground.

“What?” Emily looked worried.

“Your hair tried to kill me,” he said, and held his hand up to keep her away from him.

She looked at him mischievously. “Now, Robert. Why would it do that?” She leaned on her back leg and crossed her arms.

“I don’t know.”

“I don’t need my hair to do that for me,” she said, quickly, before lunging at him, eyes narrow above a sly smile widely showing her teeth. Robert laughed and fell against the truck where Emily reached for his neck. Her hands were freezing and it sent shivers through his body. He tried to slide away against the truck but she moved with him, digging her hands down the front of his shirt. He moved back the other way along the truck toward the front, pulling at her harms with his hands trying to get her hands out of his shirt. Quickly, he moved toward her, crushing the distance between them, giving Emily no choice but to pull her hands back toward her own body. He reached his hands around her and picked her up with a bear hug. She laughed and coughed and kicked her legs out behind her. “Truce?” she wheezed.

“Truce,” Robert said. He lowered her to her feet and kissed her. Before he could back up, she kissed him hard again and held his face in her cold hands. He thought of
how her green eyes looked like the bright green scales of a brown trout, textured and rich with veins of definition. She seemed truly happy.

The clouds moved quickly in the sky above them, casting shadows over the gas station and over the truck and making the wind brisk. He didn’t want to stop holding her but he knew that they had another hour of driving before Kingstown, and he needed to unload everything out of the trucks before dark.
It took two days to unload the trucks and the trailer into the warehouse behind the new house. They had rented a forklift and Robert moved each piece of equipment one by one into its place. Just as he had wanted, he placed the vats along the back wall, the barrel racks along the side walls, and the bottling machine by the front doors. The old horizontal wine press rested next to two of the white wine vats, tall narrow cylinders that almost reached the ceiling resembling stainless steel turrets separated by a small silver keep. Robert had moved almost all the equipment he needed from his father’s vineyard to his.

Now, the warehouse was filled with vats, casks, the press, the old bottling machine, some old wooden wine racks to make sparkling wine, boxes and boxes of blank labels, dozens of boxes of empty wine bottles, and a sealed case of Portuguese corks that he had wanted his father to use instead of the new synthetic corks the other vineyards were changing to.

After he had returned the forklift, he walked through the warehouse lit only by the dusk that came in from the open garage door. The air was cold and dry, but through it all he could smell the turned grape juice that had worked its way into the cracks and seams of the equipment. A small puddle of soured juice had gathered next to the wine press and Robert knelt down and watched it slowly run its way into one of the cracks in the cement, where it mixed with wood shavings turning them dark purple in the evening light. He ran his fingers through the puddle and smelled the almost astringent odor of the liquid; it was beyond anything like vinegar, but it still reminded him of wine and his parent’s warehouse on Seneca Lake, where the liquid had somehow traveled from on the flat bed trailer. It had made its way with him and spilled out onto his cement floor, to make the first stain in his new warehouse. He smiled and wiped his hand on his jeans.
He stood for a long time looking into the darkness of the warehouse after the sun went down. He hadn’t yet put lights inside the warehouse and it eventually became too dark to see. With the garage door down and locked, he walked back up the driveway, up the narrow slate path through the small iron gate to the house, which had every light on that he could see, yet no curtains to hide the bareness of the rooms.

The house too had been filled with their belongings. Robert’s father had brought a rental truck from Seneca Lake with Robert’s things the next day. The morning after, they drove to Brooklyn and collected Emily’s things from her parent’s home in Brooklyn Heights. It only took a day to pile everything inside the new house, but Robert knew it would take weeks to make it feel like a home.

They painted their bedroom light blue and moved their dark oak amour and platform bed into the center, planning to surrounded it with furniture once they had some. From the front window of their bedroom they could see over their shrubs, over the old stone wall of the church, and down to the river.

In the spring, the leaves of the trees would fill in their view and mask the river, but now, in the fall and soon in the winter, they could see all the way across the river and see the hills rising up at the horizon into Connecticut. When Robert stepped into the house, he knew Emily was cooking in the kitchen, but he ran upstairs to put away his jacket. The moon appeared to sit perfectly on the window sill as Robert ascended the stairs. It was almost too dark to see the river but the rising moon reflected a wide white line along the ridge to the east.

Downstairs, they had brought everything they had inside and piled the cardboard boxes in the living room, taking out only what they needed until they were settled. The room by the front door was a maze of boxes, mostly hand-me-down products from Robert’s father and Emily’s family in Brooklyn. The dinning room, at the front of the house connected to the kitchen, they piled their wedding gifts on the long table. Though it hadn’t been a large wedding, it seemed that everyone was very generous. There were…

When Robert came back down the stairs, he found Emily in the kitchen cooking. He knew she would be there. Before they had married, she had become depressed with cooking. She had said she wanted to create new tastes or tastes that were foreign to her
and most Americans. It’s the reason why he suggested they go to northern Italy for their honeymoon. She had always talked about how the U.S. didn’t appreciate northern Italian cuisine and how it was healthy and fresh and almost completely unknown.

Since they returned from the trip, she would cook something new every night, something Robert had never tasted before or something he had only just experienced in Tuscany or Liguria or Friulli. It was as though she found cooking again and found what kind of cooking she wanted to really know. She had told him that you can know how to cook everything, but you can only really know how to cook certain things, your favorite things. He thought that maybe northern Italian cooking was what she had truly wanted and perhaps she just needed a push to discover herself.

She stood at the center isle, her arms covered in flower, the countertop a mix of flour and egg. She smiled and began to beat the eggs into the flour with a fork.

“Is everything all right outside?” she asked. Robert sat on a stool opposite her across the island.

“Yes,” he said. He watched her quietly. She dried her hands and picked up the lump of dough. Her hands rhythmically kneaded and folded it, pushing it away from her body with vigorous precision. Her upper body moved back and forth sliding her weight along the table to stretch out the dough.

“What kind of pasta do you want for dinner?” She leaned back and pulled a rolling pin out of a drawer. Again her body moved back and forth as she smoothed out the dough beneath the pin. Robert watched her body rise and fall gently. He could hear her breathing heavily.

“I don’t know,” he said. “You decide.”

“I’ve already decided. I just wanted you to think you had a say in it.” She tried not to show emotion but a smile crept up along the corners of her mouth.

“Thanks,” Robert said. “Well, can you tell me, Princess? Can I know, Lady D?”

Emily pretended not to hear him. She just slid her hands along the thin layer of dough in front of her, tracing the edges with her fingers, bending down to eye to the level of the counter to look for bumps. She folded it gently over itself four or five times, as though wrapping a delicate present with tissue paper, and began to cut it into small strips of fettuccine.
“You’ll see,” she said, softly.

Robert walked to the refrigerator, opened the freezer and took out an ice cube. He waited for Emily to put down the knife and start placing the pasta into a bowl. He walked around behind Emily, slowly, as though to put his arms around her waist and hold her, and pulled her collar back and dropped the ice cube beneath her sweater. She screamed throwing her hands up into the air where they knocked into the copper pans hanging above the island. She jumped back, shook from side to side. Her hands were covered in flour, which stopped her from touching her wool sweater to get the ice cube out from underneath.

“Son of a,” she blurted. Robert laughed and walked slowly out of the kitchen, a clever smile on his face, as though he had done something truly genius. He knew it was nothing and that, at times like this, she always laughed last. He could hear her rustling around in the kitchen, probably rubbing up against the refrigerator trying to shake lose what ice was left, mumbling inaudible curses under her breath.

The dinner was ready long before Robert knew it. He sifted through carefully packed boxes in the living room trying to remember how he had organized his bottles of wine. When he lived at home in Lakemont, he had begun collecting bottles of wine. They were never very good, but he wanted to have his own collection, like what his father had in their basement, a honeycombed wall filled with hundreds of bottles of rare wines.

There were less than a hundred bottles packed delicately into small cardboard boxes strewn about the living room. He could smell peppers and onions being sautéed. After searching through five boxes, he found the wine he was looking for. It was a simple Chilean wine, a Carmenere, that he had first tasted when he had stayed in Manhattan. It was one of Seth’s favorite types of wines because it tasted so unique.

In the kitchen, he heard Emily humming and moving about. She opened cupboards and clanged pots together busily. Robert sifted delicately through a box of crystal searching for his large Riedel wine glasses. He found two Bordeaux glasses wrapped in cloth and carried them into the kitchen. Emily stood by the back window. She looked out into the darkness in silence. She wore her “I’m first press” apron he bought for her at the Dr. Frank’s Winery on Keuka Lake.
A pot boiled on the stove. The air in the kitchen sat heavy with the heat from Emily’s cooking. She turned, smirked, and sat at the small table underneath the window.

“Well,” she began. Robert held up the two glasses and the bottle of wine.

“A piece offering,” he said, softly. “For the princess.” Emily nodded. Her hair was pulled back tight in a small bun, strips of coal black hair falling in her face like angel hair pasta.

They ate together at the small table and looked out into the darkness of the yard where, almost indiscernibly in the distance, the vines and weeds grew high above the tall grass and moved in rhythm with the November wind that threatened with winter. The fettuccini with shellfish was great and the Carmenere cut through the taste of the clams and mussels perfectly. Robert watched Emily eat. She always ate slowly taking small bites or forkfuls, each one somehow important to her in its entirety.

When they shared deserts, she took small bites, savoring every flavor individually. Now, she closed her eyes at almost every mouthful, and sipped a small bit of the wine after each bite to try to appreciate whatever Robert had said the wine was supposed to do with the food.

“I don’t know if I truly understand how the wine is supposed to compliment the meal.” She smiled shyly. “That’s the first time I admitted that.”

“Sometimes it isn’t obvious,” Robert said. “It took me forever to understand what everyone meant when they said a certain wine compliments a certain meal.” He sipped his wine. “Sometimes I think that everyone is wrong, that their suggestions are poor in comparison. To compliment can mean so many things. A lot of it is bullshit. It can be contrasting tastes, comparable tastes, compounding tastes… it can mean anything. There are many ways a wine can go with food and they don’t always do the same things.” He paused. “I always think about the possibility that a certain wine may go with a meal only at a certain age.”

Emily smelled the wine in her glass. “What do you mean?”

“Wine ages, right?” he asked. Emily nodded. “Well the taste changes as it ages. What if there is one time where it is perfect with a certain meal, then, after more ageing when it becomes delicate and complex, it no longer compliments the same meal.”
“I never thought of that.” Emily looked out into the darkness. She traced the edge of the table with her thumb and gave him a confused glance. “So there may be only one moment where the wine and the meal are perfect for each other? Then they no longer truly go together perfectly?”

“Maybe,” Robert replied. “Maybe the ageing changes everything in the wine. I don’t know. I’m still wondering.”

Emily laughed. “You are thinking too much.” She finished off her glass. “Live without thinking.”

He leaned over, kissed her, and rubbed his hand on the back of her neck. He kissed her hard and pulled her thin hair out of the bun. It fell over her face and shoulders. When he pulled away, Emily swayed subtly and shook her head.

“Wow,” she whispered. “Perfetto.” Robert sat back in his chair and studied Emily’s face. Her narrow chin always seemed to quiver when he caught her off guard and her laugh always became nervous and short. Her smile tightened and she looked at Robert seriously. “I….” She glanced around the room. “I’m sorry about my…” her expression turned solemn.

Robert pulled his chair around to her side of the table and he leaned toward her. “Listen,” he said. “You know I don’t care about that. I don’t want an apology. I don’t want anything from you. I’m not worried because we have all the time in the world to get you passed whatever it is you have to get through. It hurts me if it hurts you. I don’t ever want to hurt you.”

“I know.” She scrunched her eyebrows. “I feel guilty.”

“For what?” He rubbed her thigh.

“For not giving you what you deserve. This shouldn’t take so long.”

“I don’t deserve anything more than what I have. If even that.”

“I’m your wife,” she said.

“And I’m your husband. I’m here for you through everything, remember? My promise to you was to support you through everything you need and want. That was my vow, remember?”

Emily nodded and dropped her head. “I grows on me, though.”
“There should be no guilt.” Robert brushed her hair back away from her face and softly rubbed her cheekbone with the back of his hand. “Just remember that we have plenty of time to work through this. There is no rush.”

“Right,” she whispered. Her thumb still traced the edge of the table in nervous agitation.

“Now close your eyes,” he began. She looked at him awkwardly. “Go ahead.” Emily closed her eyes. “Now tell me about your restaurant.” She sighed and smiled.

“It’s pretty big. It has a terrace with a small iron fence around it and a single gas streetlight just inside the fence. Inside, to the right, there is a bar along the whole wall made of polished poplar.”

Robert watched Emily’s face become calm. Her lips lifted into a soft smile and the edges of her eyelids seemed to turn upwards. She talked about the waiters and the candles and the old men that would come and drink coffee and port and sit alone quietly in the corners of the room. The menu would change every few days and she would have only a few cooks in the kitchen to help her. She would supervise every dish, and when the last meal was cooked, she could sit and watch the patrons eat and talk until the late hours of the night in the soft light of the bar or under the dim glow of the gas streetlight on the terrace.

As she described her dream, Robert felt himself falling deeper in love with her. She was sharing what was an almost unconscious dream with him and it made him feel closer than he had ever felt with her. The details made the vision almost tactile, and reachable and wonderfully complete. This secret desire must have been within her long before her desire to cook.

Robert listened to the subtle singing in her voice as she spoke, and he pictured a small café that had been around for many years, becoming more and more defined with the passage of time. Whether she had known it or not, it had been her true dream, the kind that compound over time until they can be painted like memory as though they had already happened.
The following week, Emily drove to the surrounding towns and cities and look for work as a chef. The Hudson River Valley contained many small but economically stable cities and towns which housed hundreds of gourmet restaurants. She began in Kingston, driving among the narrow streets and colonial houses, finding restaurants that served “continental cuisine.” It wasn’t her specialty but she told Robert she could cook it better than anyone they hired.

He loved her pseudo-arrogance and teased her whenever she believed she was the best. It didn’t matter to him at all because he knew that nothing would taste as good to him as when she made it. She worked her way south down along the valley through New Paltz and across the river to Poughkeepsie. Her credentials were good enough to get her a job in almost all of the best restaurants in the area but they lived too close to The Culinary Institute for jobs not to be scarce. The Institute itself was almost directly across the river from their house, and only a half hour drive if they took the bridge to the south. She left a resume at every restaurant, but eventually became frustrated with her lack of results.

Robert worked the land every day until dark. In the mornings when it was still very cold, he spent most of his time in the warehouse making sure everything was clean and ready for the fall. It was something that he would do over and over again in the coming months, but it made him happy and excited him to walk among the empty casks and vats that he finally called his own.

In the late mornings and early afternoons, he walked along the rows of vines cutting them free of the overgrowth, separating the shoots from weeds and shrubs that had choked the grapevines for so long. He piled the weeds in the yard between the house and the warehouse and burned them. In the late afternoons, he drove the tractor along the cleared rows and cleared the surrounding land so that he could plant more vines.
After dark when he could no longer see down the rows and the cold made working with his hands frustrating, he returned to the house to unpack and empty the boxes in the front room. Over the next two weeks he moved from room to room, painting and unpacking their things.

When Emily returned in the late afternoon or early evening, if it was a good day for her, if a restaurant wanted to see her again, then she would cook something extravagant that she had learned in Italy or The Culinary Institute while Robert kept unpacking and hanging pictures and moving furniture to different places around the house. If it was a bad day, she gloated and decided not to cook. In the evenings when Robert was returning to the house from the warehouse, he knew if Emily had a good or a bad day by smelling the air by the kitchen window.

In the crispness of the winter night, the scent of her cooking carried itself almost palpably into the yard, and Robert knew immediately what the night would be like. If there was no scent, except the chill and the scent of pine that traveled the distance of the vineyard from land beyond, then Robert knew that he needed to be compassionate and supportive, that her night would be quiet and somber, and that he would make dinner and make it poorly so that she could make fun of him to cheer herself up. It was something he did almost unconsciously. When he cooked, he let her tell him how to make it better next time. He thought that it would make her feel better about herself.

After Robert had moved most of the furniture in the rooms he wanted them in, he began spending all of the day among the vines, hacking and pulling at the underbrush that had taken great care to ensnare the vines. He was careful not to cut or damage the shoots. After he cut everything else away, then he would go back and prune them properly. First he wanted to make sure that every vine was free of the almost parasitic shrubs.

As January passed, Robert only walked back to the vines every few days. He pulled off a few weeds here and there and piled them in the grass, but decided to wait until just before spring to clear out the rest of the spaces between the rows of vines. Winter had set in and between the snow and the wind he found it difficult to work for more than a few hours at a time.
The pines at the edge of the property only blocked some of the wind and the rest dropped down and blew right up the rows of vines toward the house. He spent most of the time in the warehouse cleaning out the press and the vats, checking hoses and temperature gauges, and installing electric wiring. During the evenings, he would spend as much time with Emily has he could.

They would paint the rooms, or clear the fallen oak branches out of the yard, or talk of planting an herb garden next to the house in the spring. They often talked of everything they wanted to do when spring came. Often, Robert sat and watched Emily move gracefully about the kitchen. He loved to watch her cook. He believed her when she said she could probably cook almost anything in that kitchen blindfolded.

They tried to make love only when they both felt comfortable. They came close many times, yet one of them would hold back, Emily because of her mood, or Robert because the moment may have felt forced. If there was too much pressure on the moment, Robert felt awkward and held back. He pleased her in every way he knew she was comfortable with, yet he stopped himself from continuing.

At the end of January, Emily found a job as a chef in Newburg, a small town south of Kingston on the Hudson River. In the evening, she pulled up the driveway quickly and Robert heard the tires slide along the gravel when she slammed on the breaks. He moved about the living room organizing books on a bookshelf and heard her footsteps thump up the steps on the porch and the sound of the key in the front door. Emily almost fell inside when the door swung open, her long camel skin coat flowing behind her.

“I got it,” she yelled. Small gloved hands fumbled at her leather boots. She balanced on one foot, pulling at the heel of the other. “Hey.” She looked toward the back of the house. Robert walked into the hall from the living room.

“Yeah?” he asked.

Emily giggled and threw her boot on the floor. “Head chef.” She hopped on one foot toward him and he met her halfway, hugged her tight, and spun her around.

“Congratulations,” he said. The buttons on her jacket felt frozen through his shirt. “Which one?”
“Capri.” They had eaten there once already in November. It was a large red brick building on the river with giant glass windows that overlooked a small marina. In the summer much of the business came from boats that sailed up from the city for the day. “Head chef,” she laughed.

“Step one,” Robert said.

“Step one,” she repeated. She hugged him again and he realized how happy he felt, knowing that her life was coming together.
Emily worked at *Capri* every day through dinner time and got home late most nights. Robert took care of everything he could on the vineyard while she worked. He saved his mornings to spend with her and they would sit and eat breakfast together at the small table in the kitchen. Some days he drove her to work and ate a late dinner there while he waited to pick her up. Emily told the owner, Mierca, to save Robert a small table by the window and when Emily finished cooking, she sat with him while he ate. Mierca moved about the restaurant in the evenings, smiling and talking to the customers while placing his thick bricklayer hands on the backs of their seats. His short, wide frame hinted at years of construction, the knotted joints on his fingers, the thickness of his neck. Robert loved the exuberance in Mierca’s carefree laugh. Robert imagine *Capri* to be Mierca’s dream created after a lifetime of laying brick or pouring foundations in Manhattan.

Robert worked hard everyday in the empty field behind the warehouse. When he wasn’t getting ready to plant new vines, he repaired tattered and damaged old ones. Everyday, the overgrown vineyard looked more and more like Robert’s fathers, the low vines growing horizontally along the wire trellis, the thick stems supported by wooden steaks.

From the time they returned from their honeymoon in November, until Emily found a job, they had tried to make love many times, but with no real success. Robert thought that Emily still remained cold, though she had begun to tell him that she was ready. It scared Robert to be with her when she became distant in bed.

Long before he had proposed to her, when she had told him about the sexually assault, he told her he wanted to know everything, but as it became clear what had happened to her, he realized that he couldn’t know everything. Knowing everything would scar him as well, and he didn’t want to be haunted by a history he couldn’t change.
He told her later, but before they married, not to tell him any details. He only wanted to know what he could do to help her. When he said it, it felt like a lie, but he loved her too much to make her go through the healing process alone.

At night when they lay in bed under the down comforter and he held her small and delicate frame, he tried to empathize without knowing what there was to know about her past. Many times, in the morning when he woke, she would be in a deep sleep at the far edge of the bed, as though she was sliding away from him slowly through the night.

* * * * *

When he dreamed of Emily, he always woke up uncomfortably confused. The simple dreams never seemed like dreams at all, everything appearing completely normal. Daylight would shine in through the bedroom window and she would be laying almost on top of him in the bed with her head on his chest and her arm lightly on his stomach. She lay there as though she had fallen asleep in conversation, closing her eyes and setting her cheek on his ribs before slipping away into sleep. In the dream, he felt the weight of her head and arm and the slight discomfort of her body pinning his arm to the mattress.

The bedroom light and the sun together cast an even light over the bed, the baby blue walls, and the dark oak amour. He would stare at the top of her head for a long time, studying the part in her thin black hair and the pale scalp beneath. Her fingers twitched occasionally on his chest when she was deep asleep. This was most of the dream, him, alone with her, in the quiet of their new house half buried under a thick down comforter and satin sheets.

Sometimes, in the dream, she would wake and slide her head up just enough to look him in the eyes. Her eyes where alive and haunting to him, light blue-green, half in shadow. She smiled then, squinting just slightly, the eyes taking cover behind her eye lids, leaving the glossy and glazed pupils alone to pry into him. “Hi,” she would say, opening and closing her fingers through the thin hair on his chest.

“Hi,” he would reply.

They would lie like that for a while, the intimacy growing with each second of eye contact.
It always happened that he blinked, or tried to move her, or felt his arm falling asleep. Then he would rise slowly, attempting to move her away with a gentle nudge.

Then immediately the room was dark and she was gone from above him. The comforter pulled up to his neck, his arm completely free with perfect circulation. She was always sleeping on the other side of the bed, her back to him, curled up among the blankets, almost slipping off the edge of the mattress. Then he would try to go back to sleep, to see her laying over him again, pressing her weight onto his chest, making it difficult to breathe.

When Emily was awake, she leaned in close to him, cuddling occasionally, yet reserved. When she slept, she somehow moved her way to the distant edge of the bed, unconsciously sliding away from her husband slowly over the course of the night. He imagined that to have her physically close, he had to dream about her, about all the simple things he thought would come naturally. He never said anything. He just let her sleep and wake to him again, because in his dreams, she looked more comfortable than she ever had awake.
In February, when the snow lay too thick over the vines for Robert to work, he
stayed in the warehouse and cleaned the steel tanks and checked the valves and
temperature gauges on his father’s old equipment. Then he spent his time working on a
wine cellar in the basement of the old Victorian house while he waited for Emily to come
home from Capri. They saw only each other in the evenings and lived simply while
Emily saved her paychecks and they lived off of money Robert had saved from the past
three harvests with his father. After leaving the Culinary Institute and returning to
Lakemont to live with his father, he had saved everything except what he needed to take
Emily out from time to time in Manhattan or along the Hudson.

Now, the mid-February wind blew briskly across the low-trimmed vines and
Robert felt in no mood to push himself to work. He returned to the warmth of the house,
removed his jacket and scarf, and sat in the living room in the only chair, an old leather
recliner Emily’s mother had given them before they left for Italy. The emptiness of the
room saddened him and he thought about Emily. It had been five months since they had
married. In that time, they had talked about and tried to make love many times. At first,
she pushed him away, asking for more time. Later on, as the months past, her obvious
physical discomfort made Robert afraid to go on. She had told him she was ready, but
her mannerisms told him her past still haunted her.

Not long after the wedding, they began to pleasure each other sexually in every
way but intercourse, so Robert expected her to progress naturally away from her problem.

Now, he felt young and naïve and he had been trying to understand why he felt so
against just doing it once, finishing the act once. Emily had been expressing her
readiness for some time, the only problem now being Robert’s psychological impotence.
When he thought about the other man, he felt emasculated, as though her past would
always have a hold on their present.
Lately, when Emily came home from work, she had been cold and tired, but always excited to see Robert again. Sitting in the chair in the empty room, Robert thought of how he had been complicating Emily’s past more so than she. He felt ashamed that it had become his problem as well. He loved her and wanted to help her through everything. He took on helping her out of love, but helping her became a not only an obligation out of love, but a self aggrandizing notion of his goodness as a person. It disgusted him that he felt himself her savior, yet he knew he didn’t want to be anything else, let alone let anyone else be it for her. Even before the marriage, he wanted it to be no one else but him that helped her move on. Whether out of worry that another man might not be so patient, or his own pride and need to help people, he wasn’t sure. He only knew that he felt part of his identity as a person lay within the need to help others. Perhaps it was all selfish, he thought.

He stood and walked to the front window. The sound of his footsteps on the hardwood floor echoed off the bare walls and reminded him of how little they owned to make the house feel more comfortable.

Tonight, he thought, he’d get over his problem, help Emily with hers, and put his weakness and her fear behind them. In every other aspect of her life, Emily exuded sensuality and sexuality. To outsiders, she showed nothing but normality. Even to Robert, she had only one, thought apparently deep rooted, problem. Only intercourse caused even the slightest hesitation. All he felt he needed to do was get her to feel what she never knew she could.

Throughout the evening, he place candles around the bedroom and made a fire in the fireplace that opened up to both the living room and dinning room. Once Emily came home and realized his intentions, Robert knew she would want to make a light meal for the both of them then move slowly up to their bedroom. This night would be different, and she would feel the difference, he thought, by the way he set the mood. As soon as she walked into house, everything would communicate his intentions. Before, their attempts had become complacent and the act seemed destined for failure by how uncomfortable the scene became. Tonight, he felt he could finally move all of that away.

When the car pulled in the driveway just after dusk, Robert lit the candles on the dinning room table and in the bedroom upstairs before returning the first floor to dim the
lights so that the firelight flickered on the bare walls and shadows quickly hid themselves in the corners of room.

Emily opened the front door quickly and stepped onto the small floor mat to stomp the snow off her feet before taking her high-heeled boots off. Robert watched her from the dinning room where he sat with a decanter of red wine and two empty glasses.

“Hi,” he said.

She looked at him and smiled while she clumsily unzipped and pulled off her boots.

“What’s all this?” she said smirking.

Robert shrugged his shoulders and looked around the room innocently.

“Perhaps we could make dinner together?”

“Can you handle me in the kitchen?” she asked.

Robert stood and poured the wine from the decanter into the glasses. “I think I’m ready to start listening to you, if that’s what you mean.” He handed her a glass. “It’s Borriollo. Seth recommended it.”

Emily took the glass, smelled the wine, then took a small sip before nodding slightly. “I’m sure I can think of something for you to do with me.”

Robert followed her into the kitchen and helped her take off her jacket and he hung it in the closet in the hallway. Emily sat down at the small table against the window in the kitchen and watched Robert return. The corners of her eyes creased upwards and Robert knew she understood. He kissed her on the forehead and sat down across from her.

“What are you in the mood for?” Emily asked. Her cheeks slowly lost the pink patches that the cold wind had brought out.

“You decide. You tasted the wine and know what you would like with it better than I do.”

Emily sat for a moment before rising and standing in front of the brushed steel refrigerator. “Stand up,” she said. “I need two mixing bowls, the flour, olive oil, and a bottle of white wine, not your best I hope.”

Robert moved about the kitchen and collected everything on the center isle while Emily pulled the vegetables she needed from lower shelf of the refrigerator.
They cooked together and Robert, previously feeling uncomfortable at her commands, supplicated and allowed her to tell him what to do. At first, it felt an affront to him, but he found that she had a system that if he stayed in sync with, he moved almost as gracefully around the kitchen as she did. She fed him the sauces and brushed against him closely as she moved from the island to the stove, her hand occasionally grazing his waste.

When they had finished cooking, they sat in the dining room in the light of the fireplace and the candles and ate slowly, focusing all their efforts on their senses of smell and taste. Robert studied Emily in the dim light as she ate. He felt as though both of them, as they ate and drank, left each other momentarily to savor the food and wine alone on their own. When she placed food in her mouth, her eyes left his, and drifted away, as though she momentarily lost her sense of sight to focus all her energy on the sense of taste. They ate and talked quietly until they emptied the last of the carafe into their glasses.

Robert reached slowly across the table and placed his hand on Emily’s while they talked. He traced her knuckles gently and leaned toward her as she talked. In mid sentence, Emily leaned over the table and blew out the candles.

“I’ll tell you later,” she said, and she left the room on delicate steps whispered their way up the stairs and into the bedroom.

When Robert reached the bedroom, he saw Emily looking out the window, holding herself gently with her arms folded. He watched her as she slowly moved toward him in the candlelight. She blew a candle out on the armoire before reaching him and pulled him slowly to the bed by the hand. Her soft kisses traced the line of his jaw and moved down his neck before she placed her hands on his chest and guided him onto his back.

“I want you on top of me,” she whispered as she guided herself above and over him onto the center of the bed.

In the light of the single candle they took each other’s clothes off, kissing each other’s bodies delicately after each piece. When Emily lay naked underneath him, he slowed his kisses and waited for her approval. Her eyes focused away, like she had done
at dinner. Maybe he had been mistaken, he thought. Perhaps the distant look in her eye
was an attempt to focus on the sense of touch while they made love. It made sense to him
that way, but how, for so long, was it not communicated.

“Blow out the candle,” Emily whispered. Robert leaned off the bed over the end
table and blew out the only remaining lit candle, leaving them without sight. That was it,
he thought, he had been making everything worse with worry and now he could stop it
all.

When they had finished, Emily’s hands brushed along Robert’s back gently and
he lay on her from above but he braced his weight with his arm. He kissed her neck a
moved along her chin, the faint salty taste of her sweat drying his tongue. He kissed her
cheek and tasted something different, like the freshness of a raindrop.

He pushed himself up with his arms to look at her in the dark. Her face looked
pale in the dim light from the window and her cheeks glistened. He rolled off of her and
turned on the light.

Emily lay on the bed looking vulnerable, her cheeks gleaming with small tracts of
tears refracting the light from the lamp.

“What happened?” Robert asked. “Did I hurt you?” He wanted to hold her but
he held back. “You should have stopped me.”

“Robert, no.” She slid up against the headboard. “I’m fine. It’s ok. You didn’t
hurt me. It was fine, please.”

“Then what?”

“I thought I might cry the first time. I didn’t want you to see it. Please.”

Robert stepped out of bed and turned away. “I don’t understand,” he said.

“Where you crying out of happiness or sadness or pain or…” He brushed his hand
through his hair and sat on the bed.

“Happiness of course. I’m happy, but this isn’t easy for me. I…” she placed the
palm of her hand on his back. “I didn’t know what I would feel. I couldn’t say if it
would hurt or if I would be uncomfortable at first.”

“Did it hurt?”

Emily looked away and hesitated. “Yes.” Robert dropped his head into his
hands. “And yes it felt foreign and made me feel slightly sick at first,” she leaned toward

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Robert and held him from behind. “But I thought of you. I focused on you and it helped. I cried out of happiness too.”

Robert felt disgusted. He read her eyes before they had started and thought he misunderstood them the many times before, but her eyes had really been showing confusion and an attempt to focus on only him.

“Sick?” he asked. “We should have talked about this more. I didn’t understand.”

“I didn’t expect you to. It was my problem not yours.”

“But it was my problem. Maybe not as much as it was yours, but it affected me as well. Why do you think I held back for so long? From following through with it all?

“I hurt you,” he said loudly. “I never wanted to hurt you. You didn’t tell me the ways that I might hurt you. You let me keep going, keep hurting you.” He shook his head. “I never wanted to be that. I never wanted to be,” he paused. “I never wanted to be anything like him.”

Emily laid her forehead into Robert’s back and rubbed his shoulders. “I’m sorry. How could you ever think you were anything like him to me? I love you. I wanted this. We wanted this. I never even thought you’d put yourself in the same world as him.”

Robert turned to Emily. “Well I did. There’s nothing I could do about it. I just did.”

They sat in silence for a moment before Robert reached over and kissed her. “I wanted to share it with you. Help you understand that it’s not your fault, that you’re not obligated to give into me out of marriage or obligation; that I’d be here for you regardless.”

His hollow voice echoed off the bare walls.

“I know,” she whispered. “I know.”

They held each other sitting up in the bed for a time and Emily reached over and turned off the lamp. She traced the skin along his arms with her finger tips and in the dim light that glimmered occasionally from passing cars, he saw her smiling. Through the bare window, Robert could see a few stars pulsing dimly in the dark sky. He held Emily’s hand. Her thin fingers moved gently between his. Her naked thigh rose above the sheets and the scent of vanilla stirred in the air around them from the extinguished candle.
“Let’s do something this weekend,” she said, finally breaking the long silence.
“Something to get out of the house.”
“But what about the house?” Robert asked. He had been working on unpacking
for the past month every time he pulled himself away from the vines and the warehouse.
“It will always be here. Let’s celebrate the fact that I’m a genuine chef now.”
She sat up and smiled, her thin arm reaching out to Robert over the bed. “We haven’t
done that yet.
He leaned into her. “Like what?”
“Let’s go see Seth in Montreal.”
“Are you sure?”
“Of course.”
They had only heard from Seth once since he had moved to Montreal the month before.
He had told them about the wine list at The Left Bank and how he loved the city more
than any other. Seth and Robert had lived together for six months in Brooklyn when
they had visited Montreal for New Years.
“I haven’t seen him in over a month,” Emily laughed. “Doesn’t he usually bother
us more than that?”
“Way more than that,” Robert said. “You sure your highness can handle it?”
“Of course.”
“Let’s do it, then.”
“Ok.”
“On one condition,” she said.
“What?” Robert asked.
“Clean my pots and pans.”
He kissed her hard on the mouth and stepped back.
He looked at Emily in the dark room. Her shoulders glimmered in the moonlight
like ivory and she smiled, the corners of her eyes creasing upward, her lips tightening
across her teeth. He realized that after every attempt at making love, after every
uncomfortable moment they had had in the past months together, she had smiled in the
same way she did now, just as though they had made love each time. He had been
making her happy, his sensuality and hers kept alive by each other’s love of not only each other, but their own individual need to feel their lives through their senses.
Mark Palz was born in Buffalo, New York, attended SUNY Plattsburgh to receive a BA in English before attending Florida State University in order to receive a Master’s Degree in Creative writing. He spends his time writing nonfiction while attending the low residency MFA program at Bennington College in Bennington, Vermont. He resides in upstate New York.