

Just Like  
That



Karin  
Kallmaker

Caroline's hand slipped to the back of Toni's neck. "Kiss me again."

She was irresistible, even though Toni knew it was a mistake to kiss her then, to kiss her as they slowly made their way back to her rental car, to kiss her once they were locked inside.

"Toni." Caroline's small moan ignited something inside Toni's mouth and the kiss turned hotly passionate. "I've wanted you for so long."

Toni couldn't say, "Me, too," because it wasn't true. Instead she found a real truth, which was, "I know."

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# Just Like That

Karin Kallmaker



2005

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*For Maria, and all the many friends I've been pleased to escort  
through our wine country—I couldn't have done it without you.*

*This novel is dedicated to the inspiration of Jane Austen, who breathed  
life into the modern romance novel.*

*Seventeen is prime time*



# Chapter 1

“Everybody knows that a single woman with good money is in want of a wife.” Jane waded out of the pond and stood dripping on the old blanket they’d tossed over the soft, early spring grass.

The outrageous statement succeeded in banishing Syrah’s drowsiness. “You? Wife material?”

Jane shook water out of her hair. “I figure if a woman’s making steady green and she’s in her forties, never been engaged, maybe even still a virgin, then she needs a wife.”

“You mean she needs you.” Syrah plucked a grape from the fist-sized cluster on the blanket next to her.

“Same thing. Are those good?” Jane peered dubiously at the bright green fruit, then picked one for herself.

Syrah bit the bottom from the grape she’d chosen and managed to keep a smile on her face. “I think so.”

Ever trusting, Jane popped the grape into her mouth. Syrah allowed the laugh she’d been holding back to escape her lips, then



clapped her hands to her throat, trying to soothe her own outraged glands.

“You lying sack of potting soil—it’s *sour*!” Jane made a threatening gesture with her arm that Syrah laughingly avoided.

“Yes, I know. And it’s good, don’t you think?”

“You’re trying to poison me. Gods-on-the-vine, that’s painful.”

Syrah passed over her water bottle to make amends for the lack of warning. “It’s too early for ripe. You of all people should know that. Take a little sip and then let it roll around in your mouth. Just think about it. That grape and thousands like it, this fall, next year, ten years from now, will taste like today, this sky, the breeze, those soft clouds, the hint of fog maybe tonight.” Tipping her head back, Syrah closed her eyes to the rolling vista of checkerboard greens as she savored the layers of flavors still assaulting her taste buds. “These grapes will be our memories in a bottle.”

“Like a painting, but drinkable.” Jane passed back the water bottle, then shimmied into her boxers. “I’m afraid I’ve got more than wine on my mind.”

Jane tended to put her clothes on before she was dry, and today was no exception. As she watched her friend try to wrangle her tank top down her still wet torso, Syrah had no trouble recalling a hundred similar afternoons. A swim in the pond, a bask in the sun, snacks purloined from Bennett’s kitchen—a beautiful May lunch hour was worthy of nothing less. Syrah arched her shoulders into the sun. A few minutes more and she’d get dressed, too. “Is there more than wine to life?”

“Yes. A love life. A hot woman with a warm body and an inventive spirit. That’s what’s on my mind. I’m tired of being alone. I’m tired of being your date at the Spring Fling.”

Syrah’s eyes flew open. “You mean you don’t want to go with me this year?”

Jane flopped down on the blanket, her shirt stuck to her back. “Well, yeah, I do, now that you’re back for good. It sucked going alone. I hope you had fun in Europe, because I was bored out of my mind without you around.”

"But enough to go thinking of yourself as somebody's wife? What's gotten into you?"

"The old Netherfield place finally sold, and I've heard rumors about the woman who bought it."

"Rumors fly fast around here." A breeze tickled over her nearly dry breasts and Syrah rolled over to reach for her tank top. "She could be straight."

"No. Definitely a dyke. And femme, so, hey, I'm thinking she needs a wife like me. I've got all the qualifications. I can fix stuff, dance, like to talk and think sex is really fun. My only strike is the money thing."

"You're an artist. You get to have no money. I'm not an artist and I've got no money either."

"You have a vineyard. A very large, old vineyard."

"Belongs to my father."

"And will be yours one day."

"A long way in the future, I hope." Syrah couldn't help the flicker of concern she felt thinking about her father. He wasn't as physically vigorous as he had been before her sojourn in Europe. "Meanwhile, gas money can break the bank."

"Good paint costs more than gas." Jane idly shooed away a buzzing bee.

"Besides, you won't be the only one checking out the new woman in town, you know. Move into this neighborhood and everybody thinks they automatically own you." Syrah didn't mean to sound bitter. She'd not been so popular when she'd left. But the four years in Europe had somehow reactivated her as dating material, and the fickleness irked her. She was the same woman now as she had been then.

"It wasn't that way in France?"

"Not really." Syrah yanked her tank top over her head and shoved her dark, not-quite-dry curls over her shoulder.

"From your e-mails I gather that you had a line out your door."

"For fun, yeah. I don't know what's with California since I left. There is a positive *mania* to get married. I don't just mean the

piece of paper. I thought the drive to pair up was bad before I left. Hell, it was one of the reasons I left. I don't need a wife and I don't want to be anybody's wife, either."

"And all those fun French girls didn't want to settle down?"

"They were fun and that was the whole point. But I'm home now."

Jane was quiet for a moment and Syrah appreciated the restraint. There was no point in rehashing the scorching European summer that had decimated last year's wine harvest and left this year's in doubt, or the undeniable reality that Ardani Vineyards needed another Ardani on the premises. Her father could still tell which hillside had birthed any given grape, but his energy for supervising crews and maintenance had definitely waned.

She drew on her panties and shorts, squinting into the hot sun that danced along her skin. The pleasure in it was so sharp that for a moment she could not breathe. She had thought she'd love Europe, the independence especially. She certainly enjoyed herself, and enjoyed a small amount of respect from the vintners she worked for from season to season. But she had pined for the Napa Valley sun and the blazing blue sky. Since her return to the States in December she had waited through the long, wet winter for the glorious spring to arrive. No matter the reason she had come home, this *was* home. She wasn't going anywhere else again.

"I think," Jane finally said, "that I am tired of pleasing myself."

Syrah glanced up in surprise. "But you've always prided yourself on pleasing the ladies."

"That's not what I mean." Jane stretched her long neck and closed her eyes. "So I have a good time one night with some lovely Chiquita up for the weekend from San Francisco. She goes home happy and I've certainly had a blast. Dinner and breakfast have been had and it makes me think about lunch."

"Lunch?" Syrah sat up to slip on her sandals, letting her hair hide her smile.

"Don't laugh." Jane was frowning into the sun. "Maybe it's hormones, maybe it's that, like you, I'm finally looking back on thirty."

But I don't know. I feel like I want to make somebody's entire day wonderful. Not just dinner, bed and breakfast. I want twenty-four-seven. To mean something to somebody all the time."

"Just because some woman has moved into the area doesn't mean she's your type. What if she's got no brain? No style? What if she doesn't get Jane the Artista?"

"Some artist." Jane shrugged and Syrah was surprised at the downward turn Jane's mouth had taken.

"An artist," she repeated. "You create. You have flair and substance. French women would spread you on a cracker and gobble you up."

"I don't want to be someone's trophy. I want . . . oh, hell, I don't know what I want. I know what I *don't* want. I don't want another summer of lunches by myself."

Syrah couldn't think of a response that made sense of Jane's abrupt abandonment of the very life she'd been striving to perfect since high school. What had happened to the cocky butch who had once declared, "Happiness is putting her to sleep so you can wake her up"?

She found the keys to the truck in her pocket and gathered the grapes and bottled water. "It's got to be nearly one."

Jane grunted and scrambled to her feet. "Drop me at the job site?"

"Sure. Want to have a burger or something tonight?"

"Okay."

Syrah nearly said that she'd gotten more enthusiasm from Hound the last time she'd said "burger" to him, but she resisted. She and Jane had been friends too long for a temporary fixation with romance to interfere. "I'll pick you up after the tasting room closes. I'm pouring until six."

She coasted the truck down the incline from the pond, braking carefully to keep dust from billowing in their wake. Jane opened the gates as they made their way to the shady back road. The tires finally crossed onto packed dirt and she punched on the CD player as they increased speed to the public road that would get them to

Jane's current job site. With the windows rolled down and Stevie Nicks bawling a witchy song they might have still been in high school.

The green-smudged hills and canopies of trees had not changed since then. Neat rows of vines lined both sides of the winding road. Rieslings in the sun, Syrahs in the lee of a curving hill, Pinots tucked into the shade—none of it had changed. The annual cycle of budbreak, leaves and harvest were only temporary. What was underneath—the vines—were as permanent in her mind as the soil itself.

She watched Jane heft a roll of irrigation hose after greeting her boss, then tromp into the atrium of a new office building. Syrah didn't care for the impersonal glass-and-mirrors architecture, but at least they were putting in a lot of greenery, keeping Jane employed for that much more of the spring. The job would end and her friend would haul out her paints and go back to her first love. That was what Jane had done for the baker's dozen of summers since high school. She hadn't changed, Syrah told herself. Not Jane. Not anything.

"I'm back," Syrah called out as she dropped her keys into the bowl next to the back door. Hound promptly greeted her with snuffles all around her knees, fanned her briefly with his tail, then he gracefully reclaimed his bed, curiosity assuaged.

There was no human response, however, and a quick check of the tasting room confirmed that it was empty. She headed around to the patio overlooking the sunny hillside that curved down to the road. With a grin, she beheld her father in mid-snore. The glider had always been his favorite place for a quick doze.

Setting the grapes down on the seat next to him, she tiptoed back to the tasting room to turn the door sign to *Open*. In a few weeks, early in June, they'd be open all day. A noon dip in the pond would be only a memory until September.

She tidied the bar, frowned over the tasting listing—why were

they still offering the best reserve? Its reputation was growing and she thought it was time to put it away. A bang from the kitchen announced Bennett's arrival so she went in search of a snack. Sour grapes and a few crackers hadn't dented her hunger.

"You'll never guess the news I heard." Bennett set out a container of her homemade tapenade just as Syrah opened a box of sesame crackers. "News that you should be overjoyed with, I might add."

Syrah dug up some of the chopped olives and sighed happily as she savored the delicious blend of garlic and pesto. "Netherfield has been bought."

"How did you know?"

"Jane told me."

"Jane." Bennett's eyebrows joined into a single line. She slapped Syrah's hand away from the tapenade. "Get a plate. Honestly, all the years I've tried to teach you some kind of manners. Jane doesn't know anything about it. I've been asking around and the new owner is apparently some businesswoman with money—retiring in her forties, a lady of leisure. Get a napkin."

"Mm-hmm."

"She's very pretty, everyone says, and agreeable and has already offered to host a Wine for March of Dimes get-together once the house is habitable again. There are already people there working on it."

"Jane should offer her services for landscape design. She's good enough to do it on her own. It's that artistic flair she has."

Bennett finished with the last of the groceries and rinsed her hands. Another thing that had not changed, Syrah mused. Bennett's hands were as strong and gnarled as they had always been. Those hands had mesmerized Syrah as a girl, watching their hard strength turn out lighter-than-air pie crusts and biscuits. "You are the most eligible woman in the area and this very afternoon you need to go over to Netherfield and see about meeting the new owner."

"Mm-hmm."

“Don’t you even want to know her name?” Bennett gave Syrah the look that suggested Syrah must be ill not to have demanded that piece of information at the outset.

“I’m sure you’ll tell me.”

Tomatoes squished between Bennett’s fingers, pulp and seeds falling into a bowl while the beautifully ripe flesh headed for the cookpot. “Perhaps I won’t, if you’re being snippy. You are very tiresome sometimes. All I want is to see you happy and settled.”

“Bennett, you’ve never been settled and I think you’ve been happy.”

“That’s me, not you. I never was the settling kind.” She rinsed her hands again with an air of finality.

“Maybe I’m not either.”

Bennett snapped the lid on the tapenade shut. “I knew your mother, and you are just like her. Some people are meant to go around in pairs, and Jane Lucas should have nothing to say to a woman like Missy Bingley.”

“Why not? A woman named Missy seems exactly like Jane’s type.”

Drawers were being opened and examined with increasing agitation. “I don’t know why you persist in being so obtuse. Jane is a very nice girl but she’s eccentric.”

“You mean she works with her hands.”

“If you insist, yes. I know she calls those paintings art, but it might as well be mud she’s slapping onto the canvas. Cheaper than all that wasted paint. She is hardly suitable as a partner for someone like Missy Bingley, who I’m told is extremely cultured and affable.”

Syrah knew better than to argue. Bennett had lived all her life in the valley and had spent the majority of it ruling the Ardani household with her iron fist. Not for the first time Syrah marveled at the traditionalist values that kept Bennett going to mass three times a week but somehow blended with her staunch loyalty toward all things Ardani. She’d play matchmaker between two les-

bians and go to confession for having brought about such an event, then sleep like a baby.

Syrah was rescued from further comment by her father's tread outside the kitchen door. He held the bunch of grapes Syrah had left for him in one hand and looked both sleepy and pleased at the same time.

"What did you think?" He hoisted the bunch at Syrah.

"They'll be some of the best Gewürz' we've had in a while."

He grinned. "You got that right. Not a lot to mellow them yet, but the early rain brought the peach blossoms on early and the overtones will be there."

Bennett bustled between them. "Netherfield has been bought, finally, and Syrah refuses to go and meet the woman. A very wealthy woman, I must say, and an asset to the community." Bennett relieved Syrah's father of the grapes, plopped them into a bowl and hurried out to the tasting room to leave them on the bar. The swinging door between kitchen and tasting room allowed Bennett's continuing remarks to arrive in bursts. "You would think . . . can't be single forever . . . Jane Lucas indeed . . . suitable and eligible . . . never see thirty again . . ."

Syrah watched her father pat his pockets. As usual, his glasses were in his breast pocket, which he checked last. "There was a letter in the post last week that I didn't understand. Found it this morning and thought I should ask you." He put the glasses on his nose and repeated the patting process until a folded envelope was discovered in his back pants pocket. He unfolded the enclosed letter and reviewed it with raised eyebrows before handing it to her.

"'Mr. Anthony Ardani, Chairman of the Board.' Huh?" Syrah gave her father a puzzled look. Chairman of the Board? "We regret that your lack of response to pressing concerns of Ardani Vineyards, Incorporated, creditors has required the retention of a consultant appointed by the court to examine and recommend a course of action for the resolution of shareholder concerns.'" She



scanned the rest of the letter, growing increasingly confused and dismayed. “Dad? When did we become a corporation?”

He shrugged. “A few years ago. While you were away. It seemed like a good idea. They all invested money and then we could borrow to renovate the bottling and replace the large barrels. I bought the Tarpay fields they auctioned, too. Didn’t cost me a dime.”

“But, Dad . . .”

“Everything will be okay, pumpkin.”

“But, Dad, these people who signed the letter, they own more of Ardani than you do. They’ve hired someone to tell us how to run our business and if we don’t do what this consultant person says—” She glanced down at the final line in horror. “‘Creditors may choose to call their loans due, resulting in the forced sale of assets sufficient to repay the debts.’”

“That’s the part I don’t understand.” He regarded her with faint worry clouding his brow.

“Our land, the winery, that’s what they mean by assets, Dad.”

“But I didn’t sell those to anyone else.”

“You gave away shares.”

“Yes, but I didn’t sell anything.”

Syrah closed her eyes. “They became the same thing when you incorporated.” With a rising feeling of dread, she added, “You’re the smallest shareholder, it says here.”

“But I’m Chairman of the Board.”

“Oh, Dad . . .” She sank into a chair at the kitchen table.

“There’s two cars pulling in,” Bennett announced as she re-entered the kitchen. “One’s a Mercedes.”

“I’ll pour,” her father offered.

Syrah nodded numbly. She read the letter again and tried to take in the situation. She didn’t know much about corporations, but it seemed like very bad news when a judge was involved in making decisions about a business’s future. The voices from the tasting room washed over her, the familiar rise and fall not providing any comfort. Finally she quit the kitchen for her father’s office and sat down at his desk with a sick feeling in her stomach.

He'd refused all help she'd offered with business details when she'd arrived home last December. Instead, they spent the winter examining the winery equipment while he imparted long lectures about the mix and barreling, as well as the health of the slowly evolving vines. Business was booming, he'd explained, and it certainly seemed like that was so, based on the shipping she supervised, and it had recently become legal to ship wine to individuals across state lines. Crews for planting, culling and weeding were running smoothly and on schedule. The excess from Tarpay Chablis grapes were already assigned to the big mass-market winery. It was destined to be the best season Ardani Vineyards had ever had.

She lifted the most recent water bill and was confronted by a legal-looking document titled, "Receivership Update."

It was too much to take in. She glanced out the window at the rolling greens and soft golds of the fields she'd known all her life. This vineyard had been owned by Ardani's for more than one hundred years. The vines didn't belong to a bunch of banks and businessmen in New York.

She shuffled papers, trying to locate anything helpful. The fax machine whirled on and off again and she retrieved an order from an upscale market in Napa. In the tray under the new arrival were papers that had been faxed in this morning.

They announced that somebody named Toni Blanchard would be calling to make arrangements for a site visit. The phone chose that moment to ring and Syrah could only stare at it in horror. She let it switch to voice mail as she went in search of her father.

The customers, bearing bags sagging enough to contain at least three bottles each, were heading out the door.

She proffered the papers and waited while her father again located his glasses.

"Who is this woman? The name is familiar." He glanced at Syrah. "A woman, at least, pumpkin."

"I wouldn't bet on that helping us out."

"Oh, I remember." He gave her a relieved smile. "A feature in *Inc.* a couple of years ago, the issue we were featured in. This is

very good news—this is Bill Blanchard’s daughter. I probably still have the article.”

“Bill Blanchard?”

“An old, old friend. We went to Oregon together. He decided to become a lawyer and now he’s a judge.”

Knowing her father’s pack rat propensity, Syrah wasn’t surprised when he produced the magazine. He couldn’t find the tax returns from last year if he had two weeks to look, but a magazine that had mentioned their wine three years ago he could locate in two minutes.

Page forty-nine featured a breathtaking photograph of the vineyards from the tasting room and a short article about Ardani wines. Just opposite was one of the magazine’s profiles. The short article detailed the rising star of Toni Blanchard, corporate turn-around specialist.

Her father peeled away the yellow sticky note that had served as a bookmark, revealing the photograph underneath. “She looks like a nice woman.”

Dark hair twisted at the neck and East Coast stylish, Toni Blanchard gazed out from the page with an expression Syrah could only describe as haughty. If the toes on her shoes had been any longer, they’d have curled like some court jester’s. Everything about her dripped wealth and superiority. “She’s never set foot on anything but concrete,” Syrah said.

“She’s smart and she’ll be on our side. Bill will do us right—decent fellow, very decent. I’ll give him a call, how about that?”

The phone rang and Syrah again let it go to voice mail. She could imagine the affected voice that went with the cold expression on Toni Blanchard’s face, and she had no desire to hear it right now. She wasn’t reassured in the least by her own father’s forty-year-old college friendship with this woman’s father, not at all.

Feeling as if she’d eaten lead, she dragged herself back to the office and began sorting papers in earnest. The situation couldn’t be as bleak as it seemed.

## Chapter 2

A shred of lettuce dangled precariously from the end of her fork, and so Toni Blanchard didn't hear what her lover of several years had said. Annoyed that the waiter had forgotten she wanted her dressing on the side, she shook the fork to let the lettuce fall safely back to her plate.

"I'm sorry. I missed that." She looked expectantly at Mira.

"I don't love you anymore."

For a moment, all Toni could do was blink. She shook her head and replayed Mira's words.

Their gazes locked across the table. When Mira's fell back to her food, Toni's pride wouldn't let her ask Mira to repeat it one more time.

Then it hit her that *la belle dame sans merci* Mira Wickham had brought her to this hushed, expensive, off-Park Avenue restaurant to dump her, on the belief that of course Toni wouldn't make a scene. They'd end things and depart as composed as when they

arrived. Toni stared at pools of dressing on her salad and pictured them running down Mira's face. The coffee was still steaming. It would look great in Mira's lap. An earlier Toni might have given in to the brief urge to mark the occasion of their breakup with such an emotional gesture, but not now. She and Mira had been heading toward this little scene for too long for it to end any way but civilized.

She put down her fork, salad untasted. Mira could have at least waited for her to enjoy the twenty-five-dollar Aquavit signature strip steak she'd just ordered. She supposed that was a petty thought under the circumstances. Mira had always chided her for being "thrifty," as if having a bank balance meant you'd lost your common sense.

"It's been fun, sweetie, but it's time to move on. I emptied my drawers today and I'll be home in London for a while. Um, Nancy will be going with me."

"Of course," Toni said. Nancy. Fine. She ought to have seen this coming. Mira didn't deal in forever. At one time in her life, Toni might have thought two years of dating was more than a dalliance. She had few romantic notions left, thank goodness. Otherwise, Mira would be eyelashes deep in salad dressing.

Because she knew when to cut her losses and move on, had in fact made a considerable living knowing when to invest and when to sell, Toni smiled pleasantly, picked up her handbag and walked out. Their business was concluded. The salad remained on the plate, the coffee in the cup.

Any other day Toni would have paused to appreciate the cool air of a lovely New York spring evening, but the echo of Mira's voice made it hard to think.

*"I don't love you anymore."*

That statement implied, didn't it, that Mira had once loved her? Why hadn't she said in answer, "Did you ever?" As usual, Toni reflected, she had thought of the perfect reply far too late. Put her

in a boardroom or in front of a room full of shareholders and words never failed her. It was the one-on-one where she faltered.

Certainly at first Mira and she had sparkled together. They'd enjoyed how the love affair between a self-made daughter of a country judge and an heiress with blue blood in her veins earned them the occasional shocked glance.

*"I don't love you anymore."*

She felt numb. Surprised she didn't know about Nancy. Shocked by the suddenness. Even so, the avenue was crowded with cabs, yet she didn't want to throw herself in front of any of them. The thought of waking in the morning without Mira there didn't make her want to wrap her neck with a noose. Numb, yes. Heartbroken, apparently not.

After a half-block's walk up Madison Avenue, and giving it considered thought with every step, Toni formulated her "Breakup To Do List." Maybe it was because she was still in her work clothes—power suit, heels, cell phone clipped to her waist—that made the necessary process seem like a daily inbox exercise.

By the end of the second block she'd used the cell phone to change the PINs on various accounts. She had no idea if Mira even knew them, but it was prudent.

While eyeing the busy avenue for a cab with its medallion lit, she cancelled the credit card Mira had upon occasion borrowed when her spending outstripped her trust fund stipend.

Crossing against the light at Fifty-Eighth Street, she demonstrated the art of flagging a cab for a slow-moving tourist. While seated in the back for the short ride home to the Upper West Side, she tapped out a brief e-mail to her business manager announcing that she would no longer be extending use of various vendors and services to Mira. Good-bye, car service; good-bye, spa; good-bye, tee times. Over meant over.

She walked in the front door of her condominium a mere twenty minutes after leaving the restaurant. The signs of Mira's departure were subtle, but there. Photographs on the piano were gone. She smiled ruefully over the obvious absence of a very, very

old bottle of Scotch. Absent clothing and toiletries left holes in the closet and bathroom.

Only when she was putting away her watch and earrings did she notice that several pieces of jewelry were gone. She expected anything she'd given Mira to be taken, of course, but among the missing were a few pieces she'd been very clear were just a loan. Ouch.

She glanced at her pale face in the hall mirror and said aloud, "What else did you expect?" and realized she was glad it was over. Just like that, in the blink of an eye, it was over, like it had never been. Other than the occasional very good sex, and the rare evening out with Mira's friends that Toni had actually enjoyed, their dating had seemed to have no purpose, no goal. It had been a way to spend time, but Toni had precious little of that.

It was for the best.

Bottom line: she was dreading calling Missy because Missy had been certain that Mira was a leech and would eventually dump her, but only after lulling her into a false sense of forever. She didn't want to call Missy. Sometimes an old friend was the last person you wanted to talk to.

"So where is Lady Mira *reech beech* now?" Missy, thankfully, had skipped right over "I told you so" and gone directly to outraged support.

Sometimes, Toni allowed, an old friend was exactly what you needed. "I have no idea. I decided there was no point in lingering over the discussion."

"There's somebody else."

"Nancy, her skiing buddy she met last year. But it's not like we agreed to be exclusive."

"If I recall, she said those were tedious details that would get in the way of . . . what was it? Letting your love mature to its fullest?" Toni would have bet money Missy was rolling her eyes. "There are way better fish in the sea, my sweet."

"I'm done with trying. It's exhausting."

“Come to California for a while.”

“I’ve got plenty of work here, but I might be somewhere in the state briefly. A business review for the court—another idiot who has no business running a corporation. Someplace south I think, near Santa Something-or-other. If so, we’ll hook up.”

“There are hundreds of Santa Somethings in this state, so maybe you’ll be close. I’m still in San Fran weekdays, but I can’t wait to get out to my house. You’ll love it. I love it. The people are very nice and you wouldn’t believe the social life for lesbians. I’m going to a dance for the local ladies, even.”

“Sound fun,” Toni said automatically.

“Sounds deadly dull to you, I can tell. It won’t be Saturday night in the Village, true, but honestly I have never seen so many attractive, vibrant-looking women in my life. And that was just at the local grocery store.”

Toni could hardly believe that Podunk, California, or wherever it was Missy was moving, could offer much of interest. She changed the subject. “How come we’re not in love with each other? It would make life so much simpler.”

“I don’t know,” Missy answered. “Maybe because Caroline would scalp me if I made a move on you.”

“You know as well as I do your sister and I never even made it to the bedroom. It was never serious.”

“I know. But I also know that Mira was a shallow bitch who liked your bank balance.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“You know what I mean. Mira might be Lady Whatever-it-was, but she has no real capital for, what, another four years? In the meantime, she needed you.” Missy clucked her tongue for a moment. “I’m sorry, I’m being brutal. I swear, she’s the first time you’ve been semi-serious about anyone since that woman across the hall in the dorm. You deserve better than being treated like that, way better.”

“Oh, I don’t know. She’s a butterfly socialite. I never expected Mira to treat me seriously. Maybe that’s why she didn’t.” Her



Blackberry chirped and Toni glanced at the caption. "I've got a call I need to make."

"Call me later," Missy insisted and Toni promised she would.

"About this e-mail from you," Kyle, her business manager, began with no other preamble. "Is this about Bookworthy Enterprises?"

"No. Mira and I aren't seeing each other anymore, that's all."

"Since when?"

Unused to him prying into her personal affairs, Toni didn't keep her surprise out of her voice. "Since about an hour ago. Why?"

"She called this morning, asking if I thought investing in Bookworthy was going to be worth it. I didn't know it was a rush—"

"It wasn't. What did you tell her?"

"I said I didn't think it would pencil and you'd pass on it. She said okay and that was that."

She thanked Kyle absentmindedly for the information, reluctant to make any link between Mira's conversation with Kyle and her pronouncement at dinner.

For a short while she gazed across Central Park, watching the lights change and the traffic flow below her. She could only think of a long list of things she ought to do and feel. She ought to make plans that celebrated being single again. Take a short trip, reassure herself she liked solitude. She ought to be angry, or hurt, or crushed.

She was saved from making a decision about her emotional state by the ringing of her home phone. Since most of her business contacts went through her cell, it was probably a telemarketer.

"How are you, little girl?"

"Daddy! To what do I owe this honor, your honor?"

"We'll get to that. First, how are you? How did that business in Georgia end up?"

"Not well. Everyone was too stubborn. Nobody wanted to believe it was share some sacrifice or all sink together, not until the water was over their heads."

“That’s a pity. I know you had high hopes.”

Fifteen hundred jobs gone overnight, Toni reflected. She’d hoped to save a third of them with the workout proposal, but sometimes things just didn’t happen. “I did, yeah. So did the rest of my team. How’s Carlyle?”

“Getting old, like me. It’s easier on a dog, though. At least he gets to sleep most of the day. I’ve found people notice if I nod off in court.”

“You need to perfect sleeping with your eyes open.”

He sighed. “I’ve tried, little girl, I’ve tried.”

“So . . . what’s up?” Toni relaxed into the sofa.

“I had a call earlier from an old, old friend. A very nice fellow, a country gentleman, you might say. Met him at Oregon. His family owned a winery—guess it’s all his now.”

“Mmm-hmm?” She kicked off her heels and rubbed her aching toes.

“Seems you’re on your way to visit his place. Ardani Vineyard?”

“I am?” Holding back a sigh, she stretched for her Blackberry.

“Northern California. Receivership review.”

“Oh. I didn’t know it was a winery. After a while, all the cases seem alike.” A business was a business, Toni thought, though you couldn’t convince any owner of that fact. The basic principles applied across every corporation. “Why did he call?”

“He recognized your name from Christmas letters from me, I guess.”

Toni frowned. “Did he think you’d have some influence over my work?”

“I think he thought I somehow got you appointed on his behalf.”

“Right. The receivership court is in Delaware.”

“I don’t think the subtlety of that is something Anthony Ardani would appreciate.”

“Then he’s got no business running a corporation.” Toni shrugged. “I always try to do what I can for the principals, but I’m working for the court.”

"I know that. All I told him was that I'd give you a call, and I am. Thing is, he's a nice guy. He introduced me to your mother."

"Oh." Hell. Sentiment had no place in the kind of decisions she made.

"His daughter is in the business with him now. She was in Europe for several years."

How lucky for her. Living the good life while the family business failed—how typical. Home now that the money had run out? "I'll do what I can."

"We have one thing in common, that's for sure. We both think we have the most beautiful daughter on the planet, and both of you are gay. So maybe you and his daughter will be able to work together."

As if Toni had any intention of getting involved with anyone anytime soon. Let alone some debutante fresh from her European tour. "There's no secret gay language that guarantees that, Daddy."

"I know that. I did meet her once when she was two or three. You must have been twelve—the year you went to your mother's retreat for the summer."

"I remember."

"They tried for years and ended up with a sweet little girl. I wouldn't be surprised if she's grown up to be Sophia Loren. She had the eyes for it."

Great. Some debutante with fine eyes. "Maybe she remembers you."

"I doubt it. Too young, and that was the year her mother died. I was there for the funeral. Anthony and I corresponded fairly regularly at that time. Then we drifted apart. He buried himself in the winery."

And you buried yourself in the law, Toni wanted to say, when Mom died the following year. "I'm sure he's a very nice man." Business was overflowing with nice people who had not a clue how to keep their enterprise running.

"Well, I hope that whatever it is you have to do, Bill and Syrah come out of it okay."

“Sir-rah?”

“His daughter.”

“Is that Italian? Sir-*ah*?”

“No, I think it derives from French—at least the grapes by that name come from France.”

The debutante with the fine eyes was named after a grape. How *quaint*. “I see.”

They chatted a little while longer about more general topics, but Toni found herself afterward feeling annoyed and agitated. How dare someone call her father for intercession in a business deal? She’d get to California and discover, like she always did, that business had been bad, money was spent on the wrong things, and nobody wanted to take the blame. Just like in Georgia, everyone would be stubborn and, in the end, everyone would lose. Nobody cared about anyone else, just their own skin. These Ardani people were just like everyone else.

Her mood had not improved much by the morning, but she arrived at the small Midtown office they called the bullpen by nine.

Toni pushed open the door, reflecting as always that it didn’t look much like the consulting offices of a multi-million-dollar firm, to be sure. Only the administrative staff had permanent workstations, while the rest of them worked from home offices or were on the road too much to need a base. Toni skirted a pile of luggage near the door and took note of Sanje and Mike, both gesticulating as they talked on their cell phones. Crystal and Bobby were sipping from tall coffeehouse mugs as they pecked away at their keyboards.

“Hi, all. Who’s leaving? Or just getting back?”

“Those are mine,” Crystal volunteered. “My flight to Fairbanks was delayed so I thought I’d stop in.”

“Fairbanks, that’s right.” Toni gave Crystal a steady look. “You’ll be just fine if you’ve got a parka.”

Crystal, oddly, wouldn’t meet her gaze. “Parka and boots—got them both.”

Valerie, Barth and Tracy, the Queens of Admin, appeared from their respective cubicles waving hot sheets.

“Be with you in a second. General announcement, everybody, just an FYI. Mira and I have decided not to see each other any longer. I know a lot of you chatted with her, so feel free to continue contact with her. I just thought you ought to know.” Toni finished her speech and was about to turn to the waiting cluster of admin staff when Crystal leapt up with a gasp.

“It’s okay, I just spilled my coffee. Damn.” She blotted at her desk with a wad of napkins, trying to capture the runoff. Hundreds of deli napkins appeared from desk drawers. “I’m sorry about the carpet.”

“No worry—if you let it keep dripping it’ll cover up the ink stain.” Toni waved Valerie into her office and settled into her desk chair as she rapidly reviewed the call sheet that Valerie proffered. “Tell Henry that for something at this level of urgency, he can call me direct. I’d have talked to him last night.”

“He’s new. He’s still afraid of you. Thinks you’re going to fire him or something.”

“I keep reminding him he works for himself. I’m just the fixer.”

“He’ll get the hang of it.” Valerie pushed her glasses back up her long nose. “Sorry about Mira.”

“Don’t be. It was overdue, really.” She ran her gaze down the list a second time, just to be sure nothing required her immediate callback. Their loose-knit group operated on a system of trust: you needed help, you asked and you got it. Consulting and finders’ fees for ailing businesses were their bread and butter. “Oh, a call from Doc Burbidge.”

“Yeah, said he needs a word of advice.” Valerie gave a contained but obvious wiggle.

It was the best news she’d had in the last twenty-four hours. Doc’s requests for advice almost always led to large contracts. “I’ll call him at nine-thirty. Would you let his assistant know?”

She was about to ask Barth to bring in his list when Crystal appeared in the doorway.

“What can I do for you?”

Crystal closed the office door, which brought Toni’s eyebrows up. “I need a private word.”

Puzzled, Toni waved at the chair and watched Crystal carefully perch on the edge. “What’s up?”

“It’s about Mira. She called me last night.”

“Did she?” Toni knew that Mira and Crystal occasionally went out for drinks but had presumed it was innocent since Crystal was married. “What was the call about?”

“She, uh—I feel like a fool, except she’s been . . . I mean . . . Robert and I were having problems, and slowly breaking up, and she listened.”

“I didn’t realize you and Robert were separating. I’m sorry.” Toni kicked herself for not noticing the new fine lines around Crystal’s eyes.

Crystal swallowed hard, then rushed on. “It’s okay. Almost old news, now. I should have told you. Anyway, she said she couldn’t get a hold of you and had to go home to settle a business deal right away, and she needed cash. She knew I’d just gotten the payout from Bronson.”

“She didn’t say we’d broken up?” Toni wanted to ask how much money Mira had asked for, but Crystal obviously had more to tell.

“No. And, well, she said . . .”

“Yes?”

“She said you’d covered her before and knew about this but had forgotten to leave a check and she couldn’t locate you and her flight was going out at midnight.”

Toni felt as if her heart had stilled. “She said I’d pay you back, is that it?”

Crystal nodded. “It was a lie, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

“And I was supposed to be gone this morning but my flight was delayed. She counted on my not being able to talk to you.” Crystal blinked rapidly, her eyes glistening with tears. “I can’t believe she lied to me. I feel like . . . such an idiot.”

"I'll cover it and believe me, I'll get it back from her." So much for wondering about her emotional state—Toni could feel anger starting to pulse in her fingertips.

Crystal wiped away a tear. "I thought it was too good to be true. Someone like her. I mean, she's rich and titled, and British, and when I said I thought maybe I liked women, too, she *listened*. And didn't act like I was sick."

You could have talked to me, Toni thought. Then she had to ask herself if that was really true. She'd mentored Crystal through the years, giving her all the benefit of her experience. But what if Crystal had hinted of personal problems? She didn't have time to play therapist. "Mira is a good listener."

"So last night I met her at this place in the Village and gave her a check. And . . ."

Uh-oh, Toni thought. *Oh, please no.*

"And we . . . she had to leave for the airport and said she wouldn't be back for several weeks and she'd miss me. And she didn't expect to feel so sad. And . . ."

Toni closed her eyes. Mira must have gone to Crystal after the restaurant. *If I'd stayed, she might have asked me for the money.* But instead, she used Crystal. Then, in a hurt rush, Toni remembered the first time she'd been with Mira. How irresistible, how heady, how sexy and forbidden it had been. "Were you by any chance in the ladies' room when she said that?"

"Yes, we were alone. Otherwise, I wouldn't have, and I couldn't think."

Quick and fast, hard kisses and a steady, sure hand. Toni felt slightly ill.

More tears trickled down Crystal's cheeks. "I'd had a drink and my head was pounding, and I'm not excusing myself. I said yes. I felt terrible after, because of you. I didn't sleep at all, and thought I'd be on a plane, then I realized I'd have to face you."

"That's what Mira thought, too. That by the time we were face-to-face, you wouldn't feel . . . conflicted."

"I'm so sorry, Toni. You don't have to cover the money. I've been a fool." Crystal rose shakily and hurried toward the door.

Toni quickly cut her off, back against the heavy oak. "Crystal, please. Mira—I don't know what her game was with you. But not all women are like that. And I'll cover the money." She took Crystal's hands. "You know how we say take emotion out of the deal and then what to do with the money becomes clear? I think in this case if we take money out of the deal for you, what to do with the emotions will be more obvious to you."

Crystal gave a little sob and Toni had to put her arms around her. She was like a little hurt bird. Toni thought again that if she hadn't walked out on Mira, none of this would have happened.

Crystal mumbled, "It's thirty thousand dollars, Toni. How could I have just handed it over like that?"

"Because she had all the right moves." It was chump change to Mira. Mira didn't care that Crystal had worked herself to a frazzle on the Bronson merger and was still paying off her Harvard loans. "It's okay. I'll have Kyle transfer the money and you can do some serious thinking about who you are and what you want in your future while you're in Alaska."

Crystal nodded and gratefully accepted the tissue Toni snagged from her desk drawer. "Part of me, after she left, part of me felt like I finally made sense. But right now, I'm so confused."

"Take your time. You're gone a week, right? Just take your time." Toni didn't know what to do with her own emotions at the moment. She knew she was angry, but it felt far away. Too hot to touch. She tried for a comforting smile. "But stay out of ladies' rooms."

Crystal made an attempt at a laugh. "Who knew?"

I did, Toni wanted to say. She could have told her Mira liked to pounce in semi-public places. But she never talked with Crystal about that kind of thing. "I certainly didn't know Mira was capable of this."

Crystal gave her nose one last wipe and Toni let her leave. She



would find Mira and somehow . . . it wasn't the money. Crystal had been lied to and her trust abused.

The intercom chirped and Barth announced it was time for her nine-thirty call to Doc Burbidge. She picked up the line and heard it click through. Moments later she was focused on what Doc wanted, but a part of her was trying to figure out what to do about Mira.

The call ended well, with a request for a proposal to analyze the validity of a merger in which Doc had a majority shareholder's interest. She wrote the particulars down automatically, sent them off to Valerie to record and post. She had come to no conclusion about Mira, however, which rankled. Mira had told both of them she was going home, but that, too, could have been a lie.

The intercom chirped again and Barth said, "Sorry, boss, it's Rafi. Something about a car and not knowing what to do about Mira. I didn't know what to tell him."

Toni's stomach did a strange twisting swirl. "Sorry you're in the middle of that. I'll take it." She snatched up the handset. "Rafi, what's the problem?"

"Well, Kyle he call this morning and said, uh, Miss Wickham no more car. But she call and insist and say it a mistake. I don't want you mad."

"Sorry, Rafi. Did she say where to pick her up?"

"Omni, Central Park. She want to go JFK."

"Tell her you'll be there promptly. But pick me up first."

## Chapter 3

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” Syrah said, infusing every word with as much sincerity as she could.

If Missy Bingley was having to try as hard to be courteous, it didn’t show. Her broad smile was all too engaging and Syrah felt her intention to dislike the woman slip a little. “And you, too. I’ve not been in the area for very long, but everyone told me I had to get to Ardani. I think this is where I confess I know nothing about wine and throw myself on your mercy.”

Syrah gestured at the tasting counter. “Step right up.”

“Now, what is it that makes this a tasting room and not a wine bar?”

“Do you want the boring legalities while you sip our two-year-old Chardonnay? It’s a good place to start. Light, fruity. There was late rain that year so you might get a hint of sweet molds after the mild acidity.”

“I will never get the hang of all the wine lingo. And yes, bore

me with legalities.” Missy set her handbag, as petite and trim as the rest of her, on the old oak bar.

“The lingo of wine is easier once you’ve tasted a lot of variety. We’re not selling you a full glass of wine, just a taste, that’s one legality. And you’ve already noticed there’s no place to sit. The assumption is you’re here to taste and will move on fairly quickly. We’re also not licensed to sell food. Just to let you taste our wine and shop in our little store.”

The couple at the end of the bar, a picnic hamper between them, gestured. “We’ll take the ’oh-three Cabernet and the ’oh-two reserve. It’s wonderful.”

Syrah nodded. “Be right with.” She watched Missy taste the Chardonnay and recognized a few signs that Missy knew a little more about wine than she let on. “There is a small fee for the tasting, but we’ll only charge that if you don’t buy a bottle of wine.”

“This is delicious,” Missy said. “A little bite on the end, but it eases off on the way down.”

“That’s the late rain talking.” Syrah went around the bar to the store that shared the rest of the tasting room’s space, picking out the two bottles the couple had requested. “Do you need me to wrap these for you?”

“Not the Cabernet,” the man said. “That’s for the picnic.”

“You got it.” She carefully wrapped the bottle of reserve and totaled the two at the register. Credit card and wine were exchanged as she finished the transaction. “And as you can see,” she said to Missy, “what you do with that bottle of wine when you walk out our door is your business. You just can’t drink it in here.”

“Hence your beautiful patio, and that gazebo just down the hill.”

Syrah nodded. “Ready for the Riesling?”

Missy tipped the rest of the Chardonnay into the crock nearest her and Syrah rinsed the glass with a swish of water, tipping it again into the crock. “Oh, it’s got a lovely color on it.”

“It does, and good legs for a Riesling. We’ve done better, I’ll be

honest, but this is a fine white wine for a party. Good quality and taste but won't break the bank."

"That's actually why I came. I'm hosting a—"

"Miss Bingley!" Bennett emerged from the kitchen, busily wiping both hands on a tea towel. "You've made a beeline for us, how flattering. You've met our Syrah, I see."

"That I have, Mrs. Bennett."

"Bennett—everyone calls me Bennett. You would like a plate of my strawberries and cheese, I can tell. Syrah here picked those strawberries this morning. She's very useful and everyone agrees she's easy on the—"

"I can't pour for her and serve her food at the same time, Bennett. You know that."

"Silly rules and nonsense." Bennett swooped down on Missy Bingley, taking her by the arm. "You'll put one foot in my kitchen and I will serve you food, and Syrah will pour for you from her side."

Missy laughed, and Syrah had to admit it was charming and seemed genuine enough. "I actually had a sandwich before I came, because I didn't want to get tipsy. But thank you very much, Bennett, for the offer."

Bennett stepped back as Missy picked up her glass of wine. "Are you considering an Ardani vintage for your Wine for Dimes get-together? Such a neighborly thing to do." She fixed Syrah with a hard look.

"Yes, it is," Syrah belatedly chimed in. "And when the order is for a charity event we extend wholesale prices and could be easily talked into donating a bottle or two of something special for auction. Our 'ninety-four reserve Cabernet Sauvignon is coming into its prime."

"I do like this one," Missy said. "It's very cheerful."

Syrah grinned. "And you say you don't know the lingo of wine. A well-balanced pH to me is cheerful to you. Would you like to try the Gewürztraminer?"

“No, I rarely care for it. But the Pinot Noir is a must.” She extended her glass.

“You’ll be at the Spring Fling, won’t you, Miss Bingley?”

“Everybody calls me Missy, Bennett. And yes, I will be. It sounds like a lot of fun.”

“It’ll seem a bit of a country dance after San Francisco,” Syrah observed.

“Nonsense.” Bennett wrapped the towel around her hands as if she wanted to snap Syrah with it. “It’s an enjoyable evening.”

“You’ve never been to it.” Syrah watched Missy taste the Pinot and could tell Missy liked it from the way she took a deep breath after she swallowed.

Missy’s gaze flicked to the pricing sheet and Syrah could almost see her asking herself, “Yes, but do I like it twice as much?”

The door chime tinkled and Syrah glanced up. “Goodness, is it noon already?”

Jane had a sour expression as she crossed the room. “Yeah, and I’m filthy. I need to wash up.” She disappeared into the kitchen with Bennett in hot pursuit.

“I don’t have many strawberries, Jane, so no poaching.” The door swung shut behind them.

Missy finished the Pinot with a slight shiver of delight. “This is extremely tasty. I thought the Chardonnay was good, but in comparison, it’s not in this league.”

“That’s why I served the Chardonnay to you first. You’ll find a lot of our Chardonnay in the markets, but only a specialty shop will have the Pinot.”

“I can really taste the difference.”

The kitchen door swung open again. “You’d think the strawberries are made of gold,” Jane complained.

Missy transferred her gaze from Syrah to Jane and Syrah was abruptly aware that Missy’s eyes were a light, twinkling shade of blue and the color that flushed her pale skin quite attractive. One slender hand needlessly tidied her short blond curls, and the care-

fully crimsoned lips were parted as if she was going to say something but had forgotten how to speak.

After several seconds, Syrah glanced at Jane and nearly did a double-take. Jane's color was rising, too, but only someone who knew her well would be able to tell under the tan. She seemed frozen in place and was uncharacteristically quite, quite still.

Bennett bustled out of the kitchen again, then paused to take in the tableau. She looked first at the blushing Missy, then the deer-in-the-headlights Jane, and finally gave Syrah a look that said, "And look what you've missed out on now!"

The silence was broken by the arrival of her father, who beamed at Jane. "Haven't seen you in a dog's year."

Jane, flushed to her ears, managed to say, "Hi. Yeah," before she went back to staring at Missy.

Syrah hoisted the first bottle of red on the tasting list. "Cabernet?"

Missy's batting eyelashes could have fanned a forest fire. "Yes, please, unless you've . . . got a date." Her gaze darted to Jane, who, Syrah decided, looked exceedingly stupid with her mouth hanging open.

"Not a date," she started to say.

"I'll finish pouring, Syrah. You could use a break after dealing with the testing meters all morning." Her father took the bottle of Cabernet out of her hand and turned his genial host's smile on Missy. "I'm Anthony Ardani. What have you liked so far?"

"This is Missy Bingley, who's just bought Netherfield," Bennett explained.

Syrah marched across the room to clamp onto Jane's arm. "Let's go for a swim," she said pleasantly, all the while dragging Jane toward the door. "What the heck was that all about?" she demanded once they were in Jane's old truck.

"Who was that?"

"Missy Bingley. You said she needed a wife."

"Wow."

"I thought I should get you two a room or something."

"Wow." Jane's turn onto the back road was distracted. "She's the most beautiful woman I've ever seen."

Syrah rolled her eyes. "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder."

"Oh, come on, Syrah. Wasn't she gorgeous? And that smile!"

Syrah had to grin. "I'll admit she's very pretty. And quite charming."

"Did she notice me?"

"Gee, I don't know. She just blushed and stared for two full minutes."

"Not on account of me."

"Well, it wasn't over me, and it wasn't over Bennett."

"I have to figure out how to see her again. Maybe I can get onto one of the landscaping crews she's going to need."

Jane was incapable of speaking on any other subject for the duration of their dip in the pond. She took forever to get dressed, which made them late, and was still in a rosy, puppy-love state when she shoved Syrah out of the truck at the foot of the road.

Hiking up the winding road to the house, she saw that Missy Bingley's car was still there. If only Jane had known, Syrah mused, I wouldn't be getting all sweaty walking up the hill.

Her father was chatting with Missy in an easy fashion and wrapping several bottles. Missy turned when she heard the door chime and smiled sweetly at Syrah, but her gaze searched behind her, then fell.

"Jane was late getting back to work and couldn't stop in," Syrah explained.

"Of course."

Syrah sighed to herself. She didn't want to lose Jane to some doomed romance for the duration of the summer, but they'd been friends too long for her not to help Jane when she could. "She's an artist, most of the time. But right now she's making the rent money landscaping."

"Jane's quite talented," her father observed. "I can't say I under-

stand her art, but she has a way with plants. Our hillside was originally her creation.”

Missy glanced out the window. “Is it? It’s lovely, all the different shades of purple and red, with oranges along the crest. I love those feathery sages mixed with the spikey ones—is that aloe? All that variety but it’s beautiful as a whole, too.”

“You should see her paintings,” Syrah offered.

“Yes.” Missy’s tone made Syrah want an insulin injection. “Yes, I should.”



## Chapter 4

“Gotta love being able to work at thirty-two thousand feet!” The man in the seat adjacent to Toni’s plugged his laptop into the outlet and reached for the snack the steward had provided just after they reached cruising altitude. “This is what makes first class worth it.”

Toni shrugged. “I actually enjoy being unreachable for the duration of a flight. Sometimes it’s the only rest I get.” She finished the water she’d requested and reclined in her seat. Turning her face to the window she hoped the fellow would become quickly engrossed in his work. Airplane small talk could be tiresome.

Her nerves quieted and she went through her To Do list for arrival in California. Missy was going to pick her up in San Francisco and they were frantically driving to someplace north in order to get to a dance on time. She hadn’t intended to make the trip so quickly, but after the scene with Mira she had found nearly everything about her apartment, New York and the office intensely

irritating. She wanted to be away from it all, for a little while. California was as good a place as any, even if she'd have to go out into the country.

When she'd gotten to Mira's hotel, Rafi had called up to announce he was ready for her party. Toni hadn't been surprised when Nancy had appeared along with Mira. It was very Mira, to have Toni pay for the cab ride to get Mira and her new lover out of town. Mira cared very little who paid for things in her life, as long as she didn't have to—that much was becoming exceedingly clear.

Both women had been surprised to find Toni in the back of the waiting car. Nancy drew back hastily, as if trying not to be seen, while Mira merely gaped.

"Nancy, Mira and I are going for a short drive through the park. We'll be back in just a few."

"I don't think that's necessary." Mira dripped haughty disdain into every word.

"It is. Trust me, it is. I had an interesting talk with Crystal this morning."

Mira had enough decency to look momentarily chagrined, then she nodded at Nancy. "We'll be right back. Don't worry, we can always get another flight to Houston."

Nancy, having not said a word, faded into the background of Toni's thoughts as they pulled away from the curb. So even the bit about going home to London was a lie. The divider was up between them and the driver, so she didn't bother to mince words.

"I've covered the money you stole from Crystal."

"I stole nothing! I knew you'd cover it."

"In that case, it's the money you stole from me."

"I'll pay you back when I get my estate."

Toni opened her portfolio and extracted a single sheet of paper. "This is the total of the cost of the jewelry you borrowed from me, and Crystal's money."

"What did you do, take an inventory after you walked out last night? Did you count the teaspoons, too?"

The sneer on Mira's face was unattractive and Toni had to stop

herself from pointing that out. She didn't want to get into a shouting match. "I noticed the amethyst bracelet was gone, and then of course, I looked for the earrings."

"I'll send them back."

"Of course you will. I'm glad we don't misunderstand that they're mine."

"You are being a bitch about this." Mira stared out the window as she sulked.

It was a sunny day in Central Park, but inside the car it felt like winter. Toni tried not to remember how Mira had made her laugh sometimes. There was no laughter left, making the past irrelevant.

"The jewelry doesn't mean anything to me. It's Crystal—I can't believe you lied to her and took her money. You could have called me. I might have even said yes."

"Given the way you took the news of my leaving, I had no reason to think so. You weren't open to talking about anything."

"What was I supposed to do, Mira? It was over. You said it yourself. You'd already cleared out, already helped yourself to what you wanted."

"I didn't think you'd walk out like that. It was humiliating. I had to make up a lie to a waiter."

"You didn't seem to mind lying to Crystal." Before Mira could protest, she went on, "Were we supposed to dine and kiss good-bye at the door? I don't get it."

"No, you don't. I didn't realize that until you walked out."

"Wait—you are not going to make this situation into a guessing game where I have to figure out what I did wrong. I walked out of a restaurant. You were walking out of our relationship. You ended it, not me."

Mira glared at her across the space separating them. There was no charm in her now, and no remnant of the graceful, easy, seductive woman who had first attracted Toni. "Yes, I did, and now you're being petty."

"Thirty thousand dollars cheated out of one of my employees—

seduced out of her—that's not petty." Toni couldn't help her rising tone.

"Is that it? Is it because I gave Crystal what she'd been craving for months?"

"You and Crystal are adults and can do anything you want. But you tricked her out of money, fucked her and left her feeling shitty because she thought she'd betrayed me. And then she discovered you'd lied to her about the money. But none of that matters to you, does it?"

Mira leaned toward Toni, her eyes dark with anger. "First of all, I knew you'd pay her back—you are incredibly predictable. And I was done with you and could have fucked anyone I wanted without your middle-class values getting all up in arms. And she was not thinking about you when she dragged me into that bathroom. If she's guilty, that's not my problem, and now she knows she wasn't getting it on with her boss's girlfriend, so where's the injury? Exactly what have I done?"

Toni was nonplussed. "You caused Crystal a massive amount of anxiety and pain. She feels like a dupe."

"But it's all better now. She'll forgive me, even. I bet we hook up when I get back. She was very . . . eager."

Toni couldn't look at Mira, and in her mind's eye all she could see was Crystal's tear-streaked face. What a horrible first time with a woman—Crystal might never trust a lover again. Hell, Toni thought, I might not either. She'd had no idea Mira could be like this. "I was supposed to beg you to stay, wasn't I? And when I didn't, you decided to hurt someone else."

"You give yourself too much importance, Toni, dear." The modulated, sexy British accent that Toni had found so attractive became a stabbing pain behind her ears.

"You resigned, and I was supposed to make a counteroffer to keep you. Oh!" Another thought occurred to her and she slowly smiled at Mira. "Thirty thousand—that was the finder's fee you expected from the Bookworthy deal. But Kyle told you yesterday

morning it wasn't going through. You figured you were owed it anyway and Crystal was handy. How efficient—you used the fewest number of people for the maximum return," she ended sarcastically.

"I learned it from you."

"I don't use people."

"Oh, really? What do you call your business tactics?"

"Honest. I don't deny they're brutal sometimes. But I am honest with people."

"Tell that to all those people in Georgia out of work because you wouldn't budge on your investment rate."

"I'd compromised all I could on behalf of the potential investor consortium. The owners, the union, the city government—they refused to compromise at all. So I walked. I told them that I would, I gave them a deadline, and then I walked."

"And all those people lost their jobs."

Wounded by the memory, Toni said fiercely, "That's not my fault. I'm not representing a charity that will give millions of dollars to keep a poorly run company in business, a company that will keep wanting more and more while everyone selfishly thinks they are *owed* what they have. The union needed to come down ten percent, and I wanted the owners to give up fifteen. The city needed to extend tax incentives already in place for three more years, and then and only then were my investors willing to take on risk at a low rate of return because I really wanted to save those jobs. But everybody wanted the money for free." Toni gave Mira a scathing look. "Money is only free to people like you."

Mira was smiling and Toni hated that Mira had successfully goaded her into a tirade. "And here we are at last. I knew sooner or later you'd resent that I inherited my money and you had to get lucky in a few business deals to have yours."

"That's not what I meant, Mira, *darling*. I meant you taking money that's not yours, and thinking you're owed it. You have no intention of paying me back."

"I don't now." Mira shrugged, coolly assured. "I wanted to end things as friends."

"I am not some aging executive who needs to pay for a young pretty thing on his arm to look successful. Did you really think I was going to beg you to stay, and pay you to do so?"

There was an abrupt suspicion of tears in Mira's eyes, but Toni didn't believe them. "I thought you loved me. I thought you'd show it. And once I knew for sure that you did, I was going to ask you for a loan. But you've no idea how hurt I was last night. You cut me to the bone when you didn't even answer me."

*I don't love you anymore.* Toni made herself replay that phrase, and she ground the shattered glass of it into her brain again and again. Remember the facts, she told herself. Gritting her teeth she said, "Your Plan A didn't work out, and you executed Plan B. You would have been long gone if Crystal's plane hadn't been late. So here's the deal."

"I'm not signing that paper." Mira waved a hand. "You can forget that."

"Fine, don't sign it. I'll sue your estate for it, with interest."

"You'll look stupid if you try that."

"No. You see, I don't need the money and everybody knows that. It must be about principle if I'm willing to sue over it. Some people might get the idea you're Not Nice."

"You'd have to drag Crystal into it."

"You're right. I don't want to, but I will. And she's angry enough that she'd agree. It'll get ugly, mostly for you. You're nice to that bombshell heiress with her own reality TV show, and you'll even party with her, but behind her back I know what you and the other Blue Bloods really think of her. You don't want to be her, with a sex-and-money scandal hanging around your neck, Lady Wickham."

Mira said nothing, but Toni could tell from the tiny flinch that she had scored a point.

"You shouldn't have fucked her."

"I was mad at you." Mira picked at a fraying edge of the seat leather.

Poor Crystal, Toni thought. She hadn't even been real to Mira. "So here's my offer. We'll agree the money is a gift. Keep the jewelry. Stay away from my employees and my business deals, for, oh, forever. We'll part *friends*."

"This conversation wasn't even necessary. That was how I felt."

"I'm sure you did. But I think a business deal is better spelled out, don't you?"

Mira went half-limp, all the fight apparently gone. After a sigh, she said, "You don't really know what it's like to be me."

Poor little rich girl. Toni stopped herself from rolling her eyes.

"I'm supposed to be rich. I'm not supposed to work for a living. But until I'm thirty-five I'm supposed to live on an amount that won't even pay your rent. What am I supposed to do with my time if I can't have a job? What except hang out with other people like me? And they expect me to have the money they do. And I *will*." Mira's eyes again glittered with tears, but this time Toni knew they were real. "But not for another four bloody years."

Toni thought, you could have gone to a top university and walked out the other side knowing your quarter million in student loans would be paid off like magic. You could have volunteered with the Peace Corps and seen what poverty really looks like. You could have studied art in Tuscany, or written that novel you talk about, and almost certainly have gotten it published. You could have done anything. But you only wanted to dance, ski and travel in your private flock of pretty birds. "There are billions of people who would love to have your hard life."

Mira's eyes flashed. "I am what I'm expected to be. I was what you wanted, wasn't I? You may not need someone like me on your arm to prove you're successful, but you liked it all the same. You wanted a foot into my world and thought the admission could be bought. Only you didn't fit in, no matter how hard you tried."

Stung, Toni said, "I loved you. I didn't love your world. I didn't like your friends. I didn't think you were really as shallow as that whole scene, but I was wrong. Just like that, I realized I was wrong."

“That’s right, Toni, dear. You have all that money you made and you tried to get into the rich and famous category. But since it’s so obvious that you don’t fit in, now you’re saying you never wanted it. Right. Fine. You keep talking that talk. Take me back to the hotel.”

Once upon a time Mira had made her laugh and feel like a lucky, happy woman. They’d enjoyed hot dogs from pushcarts and warm Friday nights strolling in the park. They’d made love slow, fast, soft, hard, everything in between. Mira had been adventurous and intense.

“I loved you,” Toni had said then.

“At least Nancy knows who she is and what she expects from me.” Mira had crossed her legs and retreated into wounded silence, not saying another word.

A shaft of light made Toni flinch as the plane slowly banked, and she hurriedly pulled the shade down partway.

I was not in love with her title, future money or social set, she told herself angrily. *I was in love with her, with who I thought she was. I’m proud of who I am, and what I do with my life. I wasn’t trying to be something I’m not.*

It was getting harder to make herself believe it. When Doc Burbidge had accepted the preliminary contract Toni had faxed him later that day, she’d realized she needed to get the California trip out of the way before he demanded her full attention. It would be good to see Missy again, even though she had serious doubts about the beautiful women, the wonderful wine and assurances of lively song at some local dance, no doubt held in a barn. She expected nothing but a rapid conclusion of her business.



“Is she here yet?” Jane bounced on the balls of her feet, looking so much like a puppy that Syrah wanted to whop her on the nose with a rolled-up newspaper.

“Not yet, for the tenth time in ten minutes. Dance with me. I’ll watch the door with you.”

Jane dutifully, if unenthusiastically, pulled Syrah onto the still



uncrowded dance floor. The Fling would not be in full swing for another hour, but the prospect of being a wallflower even this early in the evening was daunting. Syrah loved dances and dancing but she didn't like feeling as if she were once again in high school. She normally didn't have to ask Jane to dance with her, but Jane was irrevocably fixated on Missy Bingley. Syrah wanted to believe it was temporary, but the way Jane was behaving was so very Not Jane that it was starting to scare her.

They gyrated in time with "Don't Leave Me This Way." Jane was a good dancer, full of exuberance and willing to let go to the music. Her arms raised, she snapped her fingers as she twisted to the beat. Her nipples strained against her purple muscle tee, which had ridden up enough to display a washboard stomach.

Not for the first time, Syrah thought if she didn't love Jane like a sister, she'd want to jump her very graceful, elegant bones. Her own dancing, and attire, was slightly more reserved, but tonight it liberated her from her worries.

The Fling was getting off to a slow start, and at the moment less than half of the thirty to forty women were dancing. Toes were tapping and many bright eyes cast around for someone willing to make the first move. There was a small flash of light as the bar door opened and closed, foretelling of new arrivals. Syrah turned in place to see Missy enter, followed by a stranger. Missy was smiling broadly, already nodding at women she knew. Her gaze was sweeping the room when it suddenly froze about two feet behind Syrah. The easiness of the smile waned, then redoubled.

Syrah glanced behind her at Jane, who had frozen in midstep, then hastily recovered her poise.

In that flash of an instant, Syrah had a terrifying but undeniable thought. *Someday I will be the best friend toasting them at their wedding.*

She was so absorbed in the palpable exchange of electricity between Missy and Jane that she didn't immediately study the stranger at Missy's heel. When she did focus on the taller, black-haired woman, what she noticed first was the complete lack of any

kind of smile. The Dark Shadow, Syrah thought, then she connected the unsmiling reaction as the woman watched Missy greet Jane.

She felt a surge of protectiveness for her friend and did what a best friend ought to do. “Lovely to see you again,” she said heartily, and she gave Missy a decent dyke hug while clearly ceding her position as Jane’s dance partner.

Missy introduced Dark Shadow to Jane, and then Syrah, but a blast of music drowned out what she said. Syrah had no desire to ask again. Wherever this woman was from she had gone out of her way to overdress. Missy was fittingly clad in jeans and a tank top that was woven with something that sparkled when she moved—a casual, stylish femme to the max. Dark Shadow’s black slacks looked like raw silk, and the long-sleeved blouse was crimson silk, and shot with golden threads to boot. Given the rising temperature inside the bar, she’d be soaked with sweat in ten minutes, and with the way she was continuing to glower at Jane, Syrah was going to revel in the woman’s discomfort.

Jane and Missy continued to smile at each other without saying anything deeper than “This is fun” and “Yes, it is” back and forth. Jane abruptly offered to buy drinks—an extravagance Syrah wouldn’t have allowed, but Dark Shadow quickly said, “I’ll take care of it.”

Syrah frowned. Dark Shadow seemed to think that Jane was penniless or something. She shook her head with a distant no when asked what she would like. “Thank you, but it’s a little early for me. Besides, I want to dance.”

“Fine,” Dark Shadow replied, with that steady, frozen regard. The dark hair thick around her shoulders was so glossy Syrah wanted to believe it was fake. “Your usual, Missy?”

“I feel like a Long Island iced tea tonight,” Missy said, her soft gaze still fixed on Jane.

Dark Shadow quirked an eyebrow and for just a moment Syrah thought she looked familiar. A visitor to the tasting room, perhaps, but not recently. It might have been several years ago, before that

discontented furrow had marked the olive-tinted brow. The hint of silver hair at each temple further stumped her memory, and Syrah gave it up.

“A beer, no glass necessary,” Jane said when queried. “Thank you very much.”

Becky Argost swooped down on Syrah at that moment, her gamin grin a welcome sight. “Two-step, come on!”

Jane didn’t exactly seize Missy’s hand but they were right behind Becky and Syrah as they swung into the rhythm of the Johnny Cash song. The music brought more women onto the floor and they circulated with a flurry of laughter and flashing arms and shoulders. From over Becky’s shoulder, Syrah delighted in watching Dark Shadow waiting virtually alone in one corner, a tall glass in one hand and two beers by the neck in the other. She was sure the beer was an attempt to slum it with the local yokels.

Briefly, just before Becky steered them through a thick patch of other dancers, she thought Dark Shadow was studying her, but later, she wasn’t sure.



“Toni, I’m in love. I am absolutely in love. Isn’t she gorgeous? A wonderful dancer and her fingers—I mean, what they felt like on my back was giving me incredibly explicit ideas!”

Toni, having endured an hour of watching Missy dancing with Jane, handed her friend another cocktail napkin to mop her brow. “Do you want another drink?”

“This water is fine, or I’ll fall down. The only place I’d want to fall tonight is on top of Jane. She’s an artist.”

“Will she show you her etchings?” Toni gazed across the empty field that the bar’s back patio overlooked.

“God, I hope so.” Missy drank deeply from the bottled water, letting out a refreshed gasp. “I don’t think I’ve ever met anyone quite like her.”

It wasn't the first time Toni had heard Missy voice similar sentiments about other attractive butches. "How successful is she in her career?"

"I asked her if there was someplace I could see her work, and it's displayed in a local gallery. But she's so unpretentious. She said she sold enough paintings to keep her in landscaping work."

Toni knew when to keep her thoughts to herself with Missy, but her tone was overly dry when she observed, "A riveting success, I take it then."

"Oh, don't be disagreeable and dour, T.B. You are not going to take the fun out of this for me."

"Have fun. Have lots and lots of fun."

"Oh, and by that you mean, fun and nothing else? I'm in love, I tell you."

Missy's eyes were sparkling but Toni suspected the Long Island iced tea was responsible. She merely nodded.

"And have you ever seen such a great group of good-looking women? Must be the country air. I hope it does me as much good. You should dance."

"I don't see anyone I'd like to dance with."

"What about Jane's friend? She has wonderful eyes."

Toni grudgingly agreed about the eyes—large, luminous, dark and expressive. Of course, the expression in them hadn't been very welcoming to either her or Missy. "Really, you've lost your perspective. The women here seem no more exceptional than anywhere else I've been, in spite of all the hype about California girls. Several are definitely below the par. You think everyone is beautiful tonight."

"Well, someone else then. There are plenty of women obviously waiting to be asked."

"They can dance with one another, can't they?"

Missy heaved a sigh. "I don't know what to do with you when you're in this mood. The *reech beech*, she was very, very bad for you."

“Oh, I don’t doubt it.” Toni might have added more, but like a faithful slave, Jane arrived in the patio doorway. She followed the star-struck pair back into the bar, although it was much cooler outside, and all she saw of Missy for the next hour was her backside, increasingly covered by Jane’s hands.



“Yes, yes,” Syrah said for the fiftieth time. She frowned into the dark outside Jane’s truck window as she rested her forehead on the cool glass. “She’s beautiful and nice. But she has poor taste in friends. You should have heard that woman going on about women here being ‘below the par.’”

Jane slowed for a yellow light. “Perhaps you misheard.”

“I could hear perfectly fine from the other side of the tree. ‘Below the par’ is exactly what she said. And you didn’t have to give me a ride home—you could have gone with Missy. It wouldn’t have been the first time we arrived together and left separately.”

Jane gave an indignant snort. “Aspen was angling to take you home and you’re drunk.”

Syrah hiccupped delicately. “That’s true. Thank you. Go home with Aspen and next thing you know you’re joined at the hip.”

“Plus, well, Missy and I were really hot together and, um, I got scared.”

“Scared? You?” Syrah slowly turned her head to look at Jane. Well, there were two Janes, so she focused on Jane-on-the-left. “Since when has sex scared you?”

“Not sex, it’s the morning after. I take her to my place and in the morning she realizes it’s an aircraft hanger.”

“A very comfortable, spacious artist’s workspace, a studio, not an aircraft hangar. You think she’s going to freak on you?”

“Maybe.”

“Then she’s not worth your time.” Syrah experimented with opening and closing her eyes and eventually found just the right

amount of open so there was only one Jane. “Not worth the time of the most gorgeous woman in the room, my friend Jane.”

“You are going to be so unhappy in the morning.”

“I’m not that drunk.” Syrah rubbed the side of her nose and Jane-on-the-left came back.

“Sure. I’ll pour you into bed.”

“I’m worried about business. Worried about that business consultant. Sooner or later she’s going to show up, or call or something.”

“If you want, I could make sure whoever it is ends up in the peat moss, no questions asked.”

“Doesn’t solve anything. There are a million more like her. The banks won’t stop charging inner-est. Okay, stop. Stop now.”

Jane rolled to the side of the road and leaned across Syrah to push open the passenger door. The fresh air was nearly enough to stave off the sudden spasm in Syrah’s stomach, then she stumbled onto the dirt and unceremoniously threw up in the weeds.

The small part of her that was sober was spewing invectives at the rest of her that had just *had* to have one more drink, then one more. She’d not been this drunk since high school, and she had thought she was over being so foolish.

Jane, like a good friend, provided napkins and even had a slightly stale bottle of water to sip from. Syrah was starting to feel like maybe she wouldn’t die when, just then, headlights illuminated them.

Within a few moments a low-slung sports car slowed to stop. “Are you okay?”

Jane hurried to the car. “We’re fine, Missy, really. Syrah . . .”

She couldn’t hear what Jane said but she kept her back to the car because the headlights were going to stab her eyes out if she didn’t. It was a mercifully short while before the car resumed its journey and Syrah was left in peaceful darkness.

Great, just great. Jane’s fixation-of-the-week had seen what class of company she kept. Her best buddy Syrah, barfing on the

side of the road, great. And Dark Shadow was probably there, too, just great.

They were underway again before she muttered, “Below the par, my ass. She never did dance with anybody.”

“Maybe she’s married.”

“Married women can dance. Nothing wrong with that.” Syrah thought about the chiseled, humorless face as she kneaded her hands into her stomach, willing it to settle. “If you ask me, that woman needs to get laid. But who’d bother to seduce her, let alone marry her?”

“She’s very attractive. And has that money thing, I’m sure.”

“Like money builds character.” Syrah stared out the window, fighting the urge to cry. Great, she was an unhappy drunk now. She didn’t really know how much money they needed to get out of their problems with the loans and shareholders. Even thinking *shareholder* made her stomach turn over.

The truck lights illuminated the driveway entrance to the winery grounds and Syrah was grateful for Jane’s strong arms as they navigated the stairs to the second floor. The tasting room had been renovated several times over the years, but the rest of the house rambled in a grew-like-Topsy way, and Syrah didn’t have the balance to navigate the twists and turns. Alone, she’d have probably passed out on the kitchen floor.

Horizontal felt heavenly. She was aware of Jane being a good valet by pulling off her shoes and socks, and she didn’t protest when her jeans hit the floor. She felt so much better.

“You,” Jane said in the dark, “are going to be very, very sorry tomorrow.”

“I know,” Syrah thought she said, then a hammer hit her between the eyes.

## Chapter 5

“I’m usually better prepared, but I haven’t even looked up the directions.” Toni twisted her hair back and clamped it firmly with a comb. It had felt good around her shoulders last night, but today was not about Warm and Friendlies. The late night hadn’t helped the jet-lag bags under her eyes, either.

Missy lounged across the guestroom bed, still in her robe. “I don’t know my way around very well, but if it’s a winery I might know it. I went tasting for the charity thing.” She smiled nostalgically. “Very nice things can happen in wineries.”

“You look besotted,” Toni said, trying not to be irritated. Missy was almost unreasonable with her gooey reminiscences about Jane.

“I am besotted. She’s such a gentleman. She knew I’d have gone home with her, but didn’t ask.”

It had surprised Toni, but all it meant was that Jane was far more clever than most of the attractive, brooding butch women in Missy’s life before now. She glanced at Missy in the mirror. “Well,



she had her friend to get home. She probably has to do that all the time.”

“Do you think? Syrah doesn’t strike me as a drinker, and after my mother, well, I can spot an alcoholic a mile off.” Missy put her head down on her arms, leaving Toni alone with her own reflection.

“Is that the friend’s name?” She slowly buttoned her blouse. “Syrah Ardani? That was Syrah Ardani, Ardani Vineyards?”

“Yeah, didn’t you hear me introduce her?”

“It was too loud.”

“How do you know the—” Missy lifted her head to regard Toni in the mirror with horror. “Oh, no. That’s why you’re here. Oh, that’s awful. She’s very nice. And her father is *adorable*.”

Hell. Now she wondered if the borderline hostility in Syrah’s greeting had been because she knew why Toni was there. Frankly, however, she’d have thought Syrah Ardani would be *much* more hostile than that—she might not have heard the introductions either. “I’ve no doubt they are swell people, but I can’t say more than that.”

“Business can suck.” Missy looked almost tearful. “I don’t know how you do what you do, T.B. It would kill me.”

Toni steeled herself against a flurry of images—her father meeting her mother for the first time, at the introduction of the man she would be evaluating in less than an hour. A little girl with eyes that had left an indelible impression on her father. She thought of the way Syrah Ardani’s very grown-up eyes had sought her out for just a moment when she was dancing and she made herself remember the cold, hard facts. Syrah Ardani was the debutante who’d just gotten back from Europe. Given her roadside performance after the dance, she was still a party girl.

The party was over.

“It’s not easy, sometimes,” she admitted to Missy. “Especially when people who’ve not done anything wrong get hurt. There’s nothing wrong with thinking if you go to work every day and do an honest day’s work you ought to be able to go on doing that, live your life, raise a family.”

"But the world changes too fast for that these days. I know why you gave all that money to the Inner City Education Fund. You don't want to be laying them off because they don't have a flexible mindset or the skills to change jobs if they have to."

Toni fastened her cuffs. "It's just guilt money, nothing more."

"Shut up," Missy snapped. "I hate it when you say things like that. Mira—"

"Mira occasionally spoke the truth. I've gotten very rich."

"Playing by the rules!"

"Rules that favor me in every game. There." She patted her hair.

Missy appeared behind Toni and slipped her arms around Toni's waist. "You're a good person, Toni. I'll never believe otherwise."

Light and dark, Toni always thought, when the two of them were side-by-side. "Why don't we love each other?"

"I thought we did."

"You know what I mean."

"Maybe . . ." Missy patted Toni's stomach. "Maybe we are meant to be the best friends ever in the history of the world."

Toni laughed, marveling as always how Missy could make life seem very simple. Her laughter faded as she made herself ask, "So, how do I get to Ardani Vineyards?"



Syrah awoke with the certain knowledge that her head was stuck in a bottling machine. *Thump-click-slam-whuff-zzzzzzzz-thump-click-slam-whuff*. For quite some time she could only pray for the machine to stop.

She feared the creak of the bedroom door was Bennett bearing anything that could be food. Instead she had only a mere warning of claws on hardwood before the bed exploded in motion.

"Hound!" Syrah clutched her head. "Get off the bed, please!"

Hound licked her face, and the smell of dog breath was Syrah's

undoing. It was nearly an hour before she reached the stage of being able to put her sheets and shirt, clothes from the floor and the bathroom rug into the washing machine.

Bennett said nothing when Syrah made it to the kitchen. She gave a pointed look at a mug of coffee on the counter and went back to rapidly chopping nuts. Machine-gun fire pinged between Syrah's ears.

When she opened her eyes again, head still on the kitchen table where she'd slumped, it was just after twelve. Her nose was being tickled with the scent of fresh coffee and this time it didn't make her want to die.

"So you had quite the fun night," Bennett observed. Her hands were smoothing what looked like—in the very brief glance Syrah gave the food—pesto chicken wraps.

"It was fun until I was stupid." Syrah cautiously sipped the coffee. It stayed down. She heaved a sigh of relief. "Don't make me anything to eat for lunch."

"This isn't for you. Some woman showed up to see your father and they're in the office."

"Oh." Syrah frowned. "Who's pouring?"

"Nobody here yet, but it's a beautiful day and I bet we get busy soon."

Syrah nodded and regretted it. The thought of smelling wine was threatening her equilibrium.

Bennett set a small bowl of steaming something in front of her. "Just a couple of bites and you'll start to feel better."

Halfway through the bowl of chicken noodle soup, salty but otherwise mild, she did feel better. A small of glass of water and some Advil went down next and then a few crackers. By the time the first tasters arrived she felt nearly human. She still had to breathe through her mouth when she uncorked the first bottle but the food in her stomach stayed put.

When the customers left she was aware of the low sound of voices from the office and recalled that someone had stopped in. It

had been a long meeting, and on a Sunday. She crossed the tasting room to blatantly eavesdrop and heard the woman saying, “I really didn’t plan to go into all these details today.”

“Sooner the better,” her father answered. “I’m sure it’s all a misunderstanding, as I’ve said.”

“I wish I could say that it was, but when payments haven’t been made for so long, and there appears to be no means to begin making them, the lenders are understandably anxious.”

Syrah closed her eyes, feeling dizzy. She tried to make sense of the words but nothing was tracking.

“Couldn’t the investors make those payments? Can’t we give them more shares?”

“They have to want them, Mr. Ardani, and I have no assurance from any of them that they do.”

“But Ms. Blanchard, not two years ago everyone was saying how great it all *penciled*, I think that was the word. Why doesn’t it now?”

“That’s why I’m here—”

Syrah pushed open the door and stared dumbly at Toni Blanchard. She first connected the haughty curve of neck with the *Inc.* magazine photograph, but in another moment, Syrah recognized Dark Shadow.

They regarded each other in silence but Syrah could have sworn she saw Toni Blanchard’s dark gray eyes replaying that charming scene by the road with Syrah throwing up in the weeds. There was a brief roar in her ears as she heard again “below the par” and recalled the disdain the woman had shown toward Jane, and all of them.

“You’re finally up, pumpkin. That was some dance.” Her father pulled over a chair but Syrah declined to sit.

“It was. I’m listening for the bell. I wasn’t aware you had business appointments today, Dad.”

“Not today, tomorrow. Ms. Blanchard just dropped by.”

Sure she did, Syrah wanted to snap. Why hadn’t he told her the

woman had been in touch for an appointment? She nearly demanded an answer from him but didn't want to admit in front of the viper that he had kept her in the dark.

Searching for something appropriate to say, head pounding, Syrah was relieved to hear the tasting room door open.

She turned to see Jane, who glanced around the empty room, then espied Syrah. Heartily, she said, "Well, you look like the cat dragged you in, then dragged you out again."

She gave Jane a wide-eyed glare of warning, then headed her off before she got any closer to the office. "In here," she hissed, dragging Jane into the kitchen.

"What? There weren't any customers—"

"The receivership woman is here!"

"Today? It's Sunday."

"Like that matters to business types. It's Monday somewhere in the world. It's Missy's friend, too. Toni Blanchard."

"No way." Jane regarded Syrah as if she'd just said aliens invented nacho cheese.

"Yes, it is."

"Oh, so Missy's not here. I saw her car and thought . . ."

"I don't have time for you and Missy news right now."

"Syrah, you don't have to be that way." Jane crossed her arms over her chest. "I know you're under a lot of pressure."

"And I'm hung over. The woman who decides if we keep our land or not saw me puking in the bushes last night. She thinks I'm dirt."

"I'll talk to Missy—"

"Don't you dare! Don't you even dare." The tasting room door opened again, and Syrah closed her eyes. "I'm in hell."

"I'll pour," Jane said immediately. "I've heard you enough I can do it."

"I just need a minute to find my wits," Syrah said. She gave Jane's arm a grateful squeeze. "I like Missy. I'm being a bitch. I'm not me right now."

Jane smiled. "It's okay. I know."

There was a clatter behind her and Syrah saw Bennett hastily arranging the wraps she'd been making on a tray. "I didn't know," she said. "I had no idea that was Toni Blanchard or I'd have been done already. The nerve of someone coming to talk heavy business like that on a Sunday. It's so ill-bred, I can hardly believe Missy has anything to do with her."

"Bennett, please, keep your voice down."

"Why should I? Is this her house already?"

The mere thought that someone else would take over this place stabbed so hard into Syrah's brain that she momentarily could not breathe. "I won't let that happen. She can't be that arrogant . . ."

From the frozen look on Bennett's face Syrah knew that the Blanchard woman had to be behind her.

She turned with all the dignity she could summon, which wasn't much. "Can I help you with something?"

"I came to apologize for my intrusion on your hospitality. My hope was to make everyone's acquaintance so that tomorrow we could settle down to business. Was there anything in the list of records I'd like to review that you didn't understand?"

"What li—" Syrah cleared her throat. "No, it was all clear."

The woman's eyes narrowed slightly and Syrah felt like a bug on a stick. "Then I'll see you at nine, if that's not too early."

"I'm usually up at sunrise," Syrah said truthfully.

Toni Blanchard looked skeptical. "Then nine o'clock it is." Her gaze flicked to Bennett, standing at the ready with her tray of food. "That looks lovely, but you didn't need to bother."

"The Ardanis have a long history of hospitality." Bennett sniffed. "Under all kinds of circumstances."

"I have no doubt of that." Toni turned to Syrah with a slight smile. "Your father got a phone call and I thought I ought to give him some privacy."

Bloody hell, Syrah thought. She'd have to entertain Dark Shadow now. "I'll show you the tasting room, then. Perhaps you'd like to begin Bennett's wonderful lunch with a glass of wine."

"That would be lovely."

Oh, aren't we cool and courteous, Syrah thought. They left the kitchen for the tasting room and Syrah pointed out various appointments in the store—local pottery and textiles that complemented various Ardani labels. "The tasting room is not the only way we sell wine, but it allows us the space to provide special events for buyers, not to mention the regional awareness of our vineyard. There are a lot of big names in this neck of the woods. We're a specialty vintner, relying on my father's skill to blend and create unique wines."

"What would you say is the average price of a bottle of wine that you sell?"

"Open or reserve?"

The woman's dark gaze swept over Syrah's face for a moment, then lit on the bar where Jane was chatting with several women. "What's the difference?"

We don't know everything, do we, Syrah thought. "Reserve wine has reached a limited quantity and is only for sale at our discretion. Its value is increasing as collectors anticipate its peak. Every wine has a range when it is at its best. Sometimes a wine is reserve from the moment we open the first bottle." She shrugged. "We taste it and we know. We put it on reserve because it will go up in value. An open wine is expected to sell out and no one will exactly tear their hair out. It's consumable, certainly tasty, but it's not one you'd keep for a couple of years. Our open wines are considered very good in their price range."

"Which is?"

It's all about the money, Syrah scoffed to herself. "Twelve to eighteen dollars a bottle. Reserves can start in the low thirties and range up to the hundreds. The highest, our 'seventy-four Syrah, is over five hundred and will go up for three more years, when it peaks."

Blanchard nodded. "Your namesake wine."

"My birth year wine. Dad was so pleased that my mother said he spoke of little else. When I was born in December my name was a done deal."

“Well, I went to school with three other Tonis, two of them boys, so there’s something to be said for unique.”

Jane, from the bar, said, “Could have been worse. She could have been named Riesling or Gewürz.”

Everyone laughed and Syrah kept a smile on her face. Her temples were throbbing with purple lightning from the effort of making nice with someone who couldn’t wait to pounce on every weakness.

She rescued Jane from pouring duty and offered up the first of the reds to the waiting trio of women. They were all cute in that twenty-something way, and she got definite couple vibes from two of them. “This is our ’oh-two Cabernet.”

Toni Blanchard was wandering around the store, but occasionally her gaze flickered to Syrah and every time it did, Syrah felt breathless and annoyed. Jane went over to chat and that, too, annoyed Syrah. She didn’t like the way Toni Blanchard’s eyes seemed to be tallying up the cost of Jane’s clothing or haircut.

She briskly moved the three now giggling women to the Merlot and poured two modest glasses to accompany Bennett’s lunch. She carried them into her father’s office to find him staring pensively out the window.

“Call over?”

He nodded and took the glass she handed him. “Thanks, pumpkin.”

Her voice low, Syrah asked, “Why didn’t you tell me she was coming?”

“I didn’t want you to worry. You’ve been on pins and needles since I showed you the letter.” He breathed in the scent of the wine, though Syrah knew he had to have done so a hundred times already. “Let me take care of it.”

“I need to be part of it, Dad.” He’d been handling things for too long, maybe, she thought, then called herself disloyal. He’d run the vineyards for most of his life and done so successfully. She didn’t understand why they were having problems now, all of a sudden. “This is my home and my land, too.”



"I'm sure Toni will do right by us. She just needs lots of information."

"Show me the list later and I'll help—" She stiffened at the sound of footsteps approaching. "I'll ask Bennett to bring in lunch."

"Join us, pumpkin."

"No, I'm pouring, Dad. You enjoy yourselves." She stepped back to let Blanchard go past her and hoped she looked gracious. She suspected, however, that she did not.

Bennett muttered her way to the office while Syrah poured the reserve Cabernet Sauvignon. A new couple had arrived and Jane was chatting with everyone as she headed out the door. Syrah put out glasses and knew she'd be grateful for the arrival of full summer, when their vine manager's wife would run the tasting room.

She was distantly aware that the Blanchard woman had finally left but was too busy to do more than silently celebrate. If only she would be gone forever.

Missy's convertible was fun to drive but Toni found herself too deep in thought to really enjoy it. The road meandered through the rising and falling countryside and she thought distractedly that it reminded her of Bolton Landing. She knew her father still owned the bare bones cottage on Lake George but he hadn't been there in years. Decades.

Too late she realized she'd missed her turn and she found herself on a side road to another winery. She'd already seen more of one than she'd wanted to in a day, but when she pulled into the small parking lot the view was so pleasant she sat for a minute.

Riotous greens gave way to hints of golds on the hillside below her. She was fanciful enough to think—for just a moment—that the countryside held its breath in preparation for the explosion of summer. Most of what she was looking at had to be grapes, but there were trees aplenty, and the sunlight occasionally sparkled on

moving water. A creek trickled nearby, pushing the beep of cabs and bustle of business a long way away, but she knew she couldn't forget where home was. She had a dozen phone calls to make and wasting time looking at grapes grow wasn't on her schedule.

She didn't want to leave the view, the sunshine. It helped her not think about Mira, and Mira seducing Crystal, or the prospect of a very unpleasant task ahead of her with the Ardani business.

She banished the flicker of Syrah Ardani's eyes from her memory. The real tragedy, she already suspected, was that Anthony Ardani was a sweet, thoughtful man who couldn't find his checkbook if it was nailed to his forehead. She was certain her examinations of the books and bank records would find that the vineyard had survived under his management only because they'd not borrowed heavily. The recent influx of cash had likely led to unwise spending and unwise borrowing. She'd seen it a hundred times. And she knew how the story ended, damn it.

She was revising her opinion of Syrah Ardani, however. She was no debutante, but certainly she was unused to facing life's hard realities. Her workday began at noon and she'd barely made it on time. Her friend, Jane, for all her show of affection for Missy, had promptly begun flirting with the women at the bar and she was certain the pair of them spent a great deal of time doing just that—flirting in bars. It reminded her too much of Mira. Different bars, different women, but the same lack of direction and ambition.

Annoyed at her temporary lack of focus, she found her way back to the road and followed Missy's directions to the highway. It was clogged with weekend traffic, but she didn't have more than a few miles to go. She knew that off of some of these exits were private roads leading to even more private estates. Somewhere in the area an uncle of Mira's had "a little place" of several thousand acres, and among the other things kept there was a collection of cars most museums would envy.

She liked the money she'd made, but Toni sincerely hoped, having seen the inside of Mira's world, that she never had so much that she traveled from place to place to visit her things.

She didn't know why she was thinking about Mira. She left the slow-moving highway behind, taking instead another country road that passed the tasting rooms for wineries with names she recognized, like Glen Ellen and Mondavi. She turned west and left what little town there was. The temperature dropped under the canopy of trees and a quick right led her past the tiny marker reading "Netherfield."

The driveway, cracked in places, wound through more trees, and even the car sounded hushed. The house, Missy had explained, was over two hundred years old but was structurally sound, if in need of some serious repair. It seemed like the kind of place where spirited heroines swooned into the embrace of heroes with dubious morals.

The shade of an ancient oak tree, circled at its base by cement benches, dropped the temperature around the back of the house several more degrees. Three men were huddled over the empty pool, discussing, no doubt, the equipment spread out on the ground. How Missy had found someone willing to work on a Sunday Toni didn't know, but the prospect of a swim some quiet afternoon was highly appealing.

She parked the car, disturbing a yellow-eyed cat enjoying a nap in the corner of the garage. Jangling Missy's keys in one hand she crossed the badly patched driveway to the house. She could appreciate what had caught Missy's eye about the house and grounds, but there was a lot of work ahead of her.

A door opened with a loud creak and she turned, expecting Missy, but the hair was slightly darker, the frame slightly smaller.

"Toni! Darling!"

She returned Caroline's hug with some warmth, then regretted it when Caroline's hands went too far down Toni's backside. "I had no idea Missy was expecting you."

"She wasn't. But as soon as I got her note about the house and that you were out to explore it, too, I realized how dull Santa Monica was and headed upstate." Caroline tucked her hand under

Toni's arm as they went into the house. "What a great old place this is."

"You were just calling it a rattrap," Missy said from the kitchen table. "You were gone a while, T.B."

"I didn't think I'd be made so welcome. They have a cook and everything."

Missy smoothed the newspaper in front of her. "I need a cook, a butler, an amanuensis of some kind."

"Or cooking lessons," Toni observed.

"I made Pop-Tarts just this morning."

Caroline reclaimed her own seat at the table and picked up a glass of wine. "So you've had lunch, Toni?"

Caroline swirled the liquid in the glass idly, and Toni found herself thinking of the wine Syrah Ardani had served her. It had been undoubtedly good, and listening to Syrah explain to her customers about legs, color, light and fruits of their wine had been educational. "I have. It was very good."

Caroline pouted. "You'll still take me to dinner, won't you? We can even leave Missy here. She's hoping some creature named Jane will call."

"I saw Jane at the Ardani place."

Missy's head shot up. "You did? What did she say?"

Toni didn't want to admit Jane had been flirting and pouring wine for three very cute women. "Not much. I was busy."

"She looked okay? She was well?"

Caroline groaned. "All I've heard about since I got here was Jane this and Jane that. Who *is* this woman?"

"She's an artist," Missy said.

Toni volunteered, "She also does landscaping."

"A landscape architect? Well, Missy, you could certainly use one of those around here."

"No," Toni said carefully. "She does landscaping."

"As in . . . plants grass?"

"She's an artist," Missy said again. "Toni, now that you've seen

the Ardani grounds—Jane did a lot of that. I consider her an artist through and through and I don't care how she makes money with her hands." She sighed. "I want to monopolize her hands the rest of the time."

"How long has she been like this?" Caroline frowned across her wine at Toni.

"I only got here yesterday."

"Will you two stop acting as if I'm nuts." Missy tossed her newspaper onto the table. "Neither of you has a clue about feeling the way I do. Neither of you even has a heart!"

She stormed out, leaving Caroline to look at Toni archly. "Hormones?"

"I'm willing to bet Jane arouses something hormonal, yes," Toni said.

"This woman sounds extremely unsuitable."

Toni agreed, but abruptly she did not want to say so. There were aspects of Caroline she did not like, and finding herself in agreement about Missy's love life was unsettling. It wasn't Jane's job that bothered her, it was a sincere doubt that Missy was more than a fling for Jane. "We may have to leave it to Missy to decide."

Caroline shrugged. "She has been going on and on about the women around here. Are they really all that?"

Last night Toni had not thought so, but honesty and the memory of Syrah Ardani's eyes compelled her to say, "Some are."

"Well, take me someplace I can see the choices. Since, I am assuming, you continue to be . . . unavailable?" Caroline arched one eyebrow.

"Mira and I broke up."

"Missy told me. I'm so *sorry*."

Toni laughed. "No, you're not. I'm not either."

Caroline was grinning. "There's a restaurant called French Laundry. Let's go there for dinner."

"I've heard of it," Toni said. "And I don't think we'll be getting in on the spur of the moment."

"You could buy the place on the spot and I'm sure we'd get a good table."

"What would I do with a restaurant?"

"Feed me. I had the most wretched flight into that tiny airport in town and I was lucky to get a rental car at all."

"They told me I couldn't get one until tonight, so you were lucky." Toni found herself smiling indulgently at Caroline. There was a lot she liked about Caroline, too, particularly that she admitted to animal appetites with ease and made no secret of her pleasure in having them fulfilled. "Okay, I'll feed you. But let me go talk to Missy."

She found Missy in the large common room, at war with the wallpaper. A crew was arriving first thing tomorrow morning—Toni had agreed to let them in and get them going while Missy headed for work in San Francisco—to remove it properly, but Missy had started the job on her own, with her fingernails.

She was just digging into another large piece when Toni caught her hand and trapped it under one arm. "You'll spoil your manicure."

"I don't care."

"You're not behaving like you."

"Like I don't know that. Don't you think I'm scared to death? I don't know what hit me when I saw her. At first I thought it was just lust but I feel . . ." She squeezed her red-rimmed eyes shut for a moment. "I feel like sunshine when I'm with her. All that sappy, emotional crap from some second-rate movie. That's how I feel." A smile broke through the anger and tears. "I feel just like that and I'm loving it."

"You're very different people."

"Oh, don't start on her job again—"

"That's not what I meant. At the winery she seemed very comfortable chatting up the women there. I wouldn't want you to get in over your head and find out she's not capable of being serious."

"Oh." Missy crumbled rotting wallpaper between her fingers.

“Well, thanks, I guess. I mean, I’m sure it was innocent and I think she can be very serious. But I appreciate you caring enough to tell me. Listen, take Caroline away, would you?”

“My pleasure,” Toni said. “I need some fresh air. You were right about Ardani Senior.”

“Adorable, huh?” Missy dusted her hands. “And Ardani Junior? How was she on closer examination?”

“Who are we talking about?” Caroline leaned in the doorway, and Toni took a moment to appreciate her undeniable elegance.

“Syrah Ardani. She has gorgeous eyes.” Missy gave Toni a teasing look. “Wouldn’t you say?”

Toni nearly made a joke but something compelled her to be honest. “They’d have been quite fine if she hadn’t been hung over.” She thought of their expressive depth, the shifting shades of gold, brown and black, and her own awareness that she was the last person on earth Syrah Ardani wanted to behold. “They’d have been fine indeed.”

“Well,” Caroline said, her own eyes sparkling with curiosity, “I can’t wait to meet Syrah Ardani and her *fine* eyes.”

## Chapter 6

“Maybe it’s the meter.” Syrah resisted the urge to give the device a good shake. “We should test it again.”

Carlo filled another small clear plastic cup from the barrel in question while Syrah reset the testing meter. “We’re low on L.A.B.”

“We’re low on everything, not just the reactive acids. I hope to know by the end of the day what kind of order I can place that will get us to harvest.”

As always, Syrah dipped the testing strip into the red-pink liquid, then tasted the wine herself without swallowing it, spitting the mouthful back into the cup. She did not have her father’s palate, but she was learning. Still, her mouth didn’t say last year’s zinfandel was destabilizing, but the meter did.

“Trouble, pumpkin?”

Carlo drew another small cup and Syrah watched her father evaluate it. “Let’s get some L.A.B. into it today.”



“We’re low on it.”

“We’ll lose the barrel,” he said. “This one is closest to the morning sun and always has some trouble with stability, but it can produce complexity. It’s not going to take very much. The natural yeast has done its work.”

Syrah frowned at the meter, which confirmed her father’s assessment. Lactic acid bacteria would shut down the rising pH, but she was going to have to rely on his help for the formula. She didn’t yet have that kind of skill.

“I’ll see how much we’ve got of what and let you know,” Carlo said.

Syrah nodded her thanks. They were lucky to have Carlo’s expertise, and knowing that one of the big outfits had been chatting him up didn’t make her happy. They couldn’t compete on anything except their charm. “I appreciate it.”

“No problem. Means I have to stop in and say hi to Bennett.”

“Cheese toast this morning,” her father said.

“I am already there.” Carlo left them to the quiet of the largest fermentation barn.

“That woman will be here at nine,” Syrah said. “I wish you’d let me help get things together.”

“I think I have it handled. She’s Bill’s daughter all over—has his dry humor.”

True, there was very little residual sugar in the woman, Syrah wanted to say. “Well, I’m here and I did go to college, too.”

“I’d rather you spent time learning the barrels.”

“Me, too. I wish that was all there was to running this place, but we owe money to people.”

Her father gave her one of his frustratingly sunny smiles and said, “So what did you taste in this one?”

“Too much acid by the time it settles. Delawares can do that.”

His smile broadened. “How did you know there were Delawares in there?”

“Aren’t there?” She recalled the complex acidities of the wine against the sides of her tongue.

He nodded. "Only Carlo and I knew that. And a few temporaries who helped load the crusher that day. They came on with just the right late acids. This is the only barrel I did a blend for and it's going to be reserve from release day one."

Pleased with herself, Syrah said, "It had Alsatian tone and was more pink than a pure zinfandel, I thought."

"Excellent. Anything else?"

"Once we treat the acid, it will have an intense flavor without being buttery. Peppery without the acid."

"Very good, pumpkin."

Syrah felt a glow of pleasure. "Oh, I told Carlo I didn't think the top row caps had been pushed down in the last round. Row four, the Pinots."

He frowned and headed for the ladder. "I'll check and do it if need be."

"Dad, let Carlo send someone up there." She watched him climb the ladder and wanted to say, "I'm not a little girl and you're not a young man," but arguing with her father never worked. He just didn't hear what he didn't want to. "Dad, please."

"I've done this a million times and I'll be fine." His head appeared over the edge of the third-level scaffold. "I've got the safety gear on."

"Well, that's something," Syrah muttered under her breath, then with a start she realized they weren't alone. Even with the morning sun streaming in the open door, it wasn't hard to tell who the tall silhouette had to be. "Ms. Blanchard."

She stepped out of the sunlight at her back and Syrah could see her poised, angular face. "Please call me Toni. I'm early, I apologize. I thought the traffic would be like it was yesterday."

"Monday mornings are much better. You don't have to take the highway, either. I can draw you a map from here to Netherfield by back roads."

"I'd appreciate that."

The silence was awkward enough that Syrah broke it with an anxious, "Have you had breakfast? Can Bennett fix you anything?"

“When we settle down to work I’ll admit coffee would be welcome.” Toni took two more steps toward Syrah, gazing up at the barrels.

She wore jeans today, Syrah noted, creased and new, with a short-sleeved top of deep blue that was cotton, not silk. Both were undoubtedly acquired from one of the boutiques in Napa’s prime district. Casual but obviously new mocs didn’t give her the same height as the *Vogue* pumps had, but she was still at least five inches taller than Syrah. Five-nine, Syrah thought, or five-ten. “Would you like to get started?”

“I don’t want to take you from your work. I thought, actually, you could show me a little bit about the process so I know what I’m asking questions about.”

“They missed the lot of them,” her father called down. “Tell Carlo they’re capped now. Just one more to do.”

“Someone left the caps off?” Toni touched the barrel nearest her, fingertips running over the roughly polished oak.

“No, caps are the stems and skin and other pieces of the grapes that float up during fermentation. They’re essential to the flavor, so it’s necessary from time to time to gently push them back down into the wine. Plus, if they sit on top too long they could start their own spoilage process, and we don’t want to add that to our wine.” Syrah cast an anxious look upward as her father started the climb down the ladder.

“Forgive my ignorance, but I see pulleys, and the barrels appear to be moveable. Why wouldn’t you bring them down to ground level to check them?”

“Many wineries do,” Syrah said. “We prefer not to move some of them, though, because sediments can get stirred up. These barrels have some of the most delicate of our wines.”

“Of course.”

“I’m sure it’s more efficient to move the barrels.” She didn’t mean to sound defensive.

“Possibly.” Toni shrugged. “How many buildings are there like this?”

"We have seven more like this, another of stone for the slowest reds and two large fully automated buildings for the single-season whites. We're not a mass producer of wine. We grow a lot of grapes, though."

"From the papers I reviewed, I was surprised to see that your largest income is from grape sales, not wine."

"It's why we're a vineyard, Ms. Blanchard." Syrah's father dusted his hands on his khakis. "Ardani grapes are legend. We can claim part of ninety percent of the award winners every year."

Syrah wanted to whisper to him not to tell this woman who had so much power over their future that their competitors would jump at the chance to buy their vines.

"How interesting," Toni said. "How does that work? By that I mean, why would another winery need your grapes?"

"Not everyone has zinfandel grapes from hundred-year-old vines. Our soil, on the upper two hundred and extending to Honeysuckle Bench, has a clay loam base. But the middle two hundred sits on more gravel and our Syrah can be intensely flavored . . ."

Syrah watched them walk toward the house, torn between admiration at her father's poise and aggravation that he was and always had been so trusting.

Carlo brought a tally of the chemicals on hand, and she knew it wouldn't be long before she had to order calcium, sulfur dioxide—the list went on and on, and that was just to treat the wines fermenting or aging in barrels. She also thought that it was time to bottle a full row of noble casks, which meant an order of long-necked flasks that set the dessert wine apart. She was afraid to spend a dime, afraid if she told Toni Blanchard anything, they'd end up with nothing.

It was only half-past nine when she couldn't stand it any longer, and her footsteps took her from barrel-testing to the house to see how her father was faring.

"I'm sure I don't know anything," Bennett snapped. "It's not as if he'll say one word to me, and he knows how it vexes me when I have to guess."

"You know at least as much as I do." Syrah paused to finish a wedge of cheese toast. She was about to brave the office when the clearly audible sound of a car gearing down broke the still of the morning. A few moments later a plain sedan crested the driveway's steep hill. Curious, she watched the plain sedan turn into their small parking lot. There was nothing plain about the woman who got out, however, and stood looking about her as if confused.

With a heavy sigh, Syrah went to offer her help.

"I'm looking for Toni Blanchard," the woman promptly said. She held out a beautifully manicured hand. "I'm Caroline, Missy's sister. You must be Syrah."

Aware of how tanned and rough her own hand seemed next to Caroline's delicacy, Syrah could only nod. "She's inside. I can show you where. Would you like some coffee?"

"Oh, I couldn't. Toni won't want me to linger." Caroline was, if it was possible to be so, even more feminine and petite than Missy, and their resemblance grew stronger as she talked. "She says I'm distracting."

Not sure what to say—or think—about that assessment, Syrah led the way. She didn't spend a lot of time worrying about high fashion, but between Missy and Caroline she was feeling like a first-class frump. Jeans, old tee, even older boots completed her daily outfit. For haute couture she might find a shirt without some advertising logo on it. Saturday night had been the first time in ages she'd felt attractive and interesting to other women. The numerous dance partners had been very good for her ego.

"You left your cell phone and it's been ringing for an hour." Caroline handed it to Toni, who flicked it open with an expression of annoyance.

"Thank you." After a short distracted pause, Toni clicked the phone shut as she rose to make quick introductions. After nods and handshakes, she added, "I'm going to be most of the day, Caroline."

"That's fine. I'm going back to that shop we were at last night

and then I thought I might drop by that Laundry place and see about a table for tonight.”

Syrah choked back a snort. Right. French Laundry took reservations two months in advance and within ten minutes of answering the phone in the morning they were booked. Napa was full of the rich and famous, especially during the summer, and she’d never heard of anyone getting a table on the spur of the moment.

She watched the way Caroline Bingley’s shoulders moved as she and Toni conversed, how her head tipped and her long earrings outlined the curve of her throat. She was sensuous and Syrah was quite certain Toni Blanchard had a standing invitation to take a bite from the invisible apple Caroline was dangling.

Toni, on the other hand, was much more subtle, but Syrah equally had no doubt that she found Caroline attractive. The smile was astonishingly indulgent as her gaze traced the line of Caroline’s neck. The two of them needed to get a room. But wait, she reminded herself, Netherfield has dozens of rooms, lucky them.

“All right then, I’ll get out of your hair,” Caroline finally said, and Syrah offered to see her to her car. On the way through the tasting room, Caroline paused to touch the display of Rieslings. “Syrah, I know this is awfully presumptuous of me, but could I get a bottle of wine for later?”

“Certainly,” Syrah said automatically. “What did you have in mind?”

“This Riesling is probably perfect. Well-chilled, for a picnic.”

“It’s wonderful drunk out-of-doors.”

Caroline flushed. “Well, I was thinking of an indoor picnic.”

Of course you were, Syrah wanted to say. “I’m sure this will be perfect. It’s sharp, with a lot of tannin for a white wine, so it fades to a nice afterglow.”

“Just like some of the best things in life.”

Syrah laughed—really, it was nearly a giggle, and it was just the two of them, giggling girls together hinting about sex and

Caroline giving sly looks in the direction of the closed office door. "I think you're on to something there."

"Well, I hope to be. You can take a credit card, right?"

Syrah kept smiling as she wrapped the wine. "Yes, but this is on the house. Welcome to the neighborhood."

"Oh, how sweet of you." Caroline took the wrapped bottle and smiled ever so warmly at Syrah. "My sister has been over the top about how wonderful the women are here and I can see she had cause. Now if I can just get her looking at the right *kind* of woman, I'll be very happy for her. Missy has always liked them heavy on muscle and light on brains, so I'm sure it won't last long."

Though her lips hurt, Syrah somehow kept smiling. She waved good-bye like she and Caroline had just formed the very *bestest* friendship ever. It took all her strength not to change that wave to a one-fingered salute. Her hand dropped to her side and she said forcefully, "Bitch!"

They were all bitches, these outsiders, thinking they knew anything about any of them. Thinking Jane was stupid and trash because she worked with her hands for a living—and what must they think of her, by extension? Missy was a shallow bubblehead looking for a hot butch to take her to bed and this Caroline creature, what a piece of work. She and Toni Blanchard could have each other.

She didn't go near the office for the rest of the day. Another dismissive look from Toni Blanchard was more than she could take.



"Okay, you have to tell me how you pulled this off." Toni took the heavy menu from the waiter and nodded her thanks.

"It took two days." Caroline leaned forward, her shoulders gleaming in the candlelight. "I'm glad you found the time for me."

"I want to finish and get back to New York." Toni's gaze flicked over the menu. Asparagus soup with black truffle syrup caught her eye.

“You disappear in the morning already on the phone, come back in the evening already full from another woman’s cooking—”

“A woman could get spoiled by Bennett’s food.”

“Sure it’s not other attractions?” Caroline idly ran one finger along her neck.

“What do you mean by that?”

“Well, I see what you meant by the eyes, that’s all. If she were my type I’d not mind gazing into them for hours at a stretch.”

“We’ve not talked at all. My business is with her father.”

“Business, business, business. You spend half the night waking up poor souls in other parts of the world. Who is Crystal and why the long talks?”

“A colleague and someone who needs to talk.” She wasn’t going to discuss Crystal or Mira with Caroline. “So you didn’t tell me how you managed this. I did call but couldn’t get through.”

Caroline sat back, looking pleased. It was impossible not to observe the welcoming hollow between her breasts as she moved. “I posted a French Laundry wish on eBay. Someone parted with their reservation for the right compensation.”

Toni laughed. “How ingenious, and how typical of you. The menu looks wonderful but it may not hold up to that kind of extravagance.”

“The look in your eyes, just now, was what I was after, not the meal.”

Toni made herself study the menu. “Fresh king salmon sounds good to me today.”

“Why do you do that?”

“What?” She had to glance up.

Caroline’s expression still had that molten invitation in her eyes, but there was a mild annoyance there as well. “Every time I say something intimate you divert me.”

Surprised by Caroline’s directness, Toni said honestly, “Maybe I’m avoiding intimacy.”

“I know that Mira has many things that I don’t.”

“That’s true.”



Caroline's sigh was exasperated. "You really know how to hurt a girl."

Toni frowned as she idly played with the dinner knife. "I don't understand that. I agreed with you, honestly."

"Sometimes a girl doesn't want honesty."

"If I'll lie to you about something trivial, how will you trust I'm telling you the truth when it's important? Mira has qualities that you do not." Caroline took a quick breath and Toni instantly regretted her lack of clarity. "Caroline—I'm sorry. Most of the qualities Mira has that you do not aren't good qualities. You are a much nicer woman than she turned out to be."

"Oh." Caroline's lower lip quivered for a moment. "I thought you meant—"

"She is beautiful." Toni shrugged. "I'm not going to lie about that. You are as well. That dress is a walking crime."

"I thought you'd never notice."

"I noticed the moment you came down the stairs. Mira is beautiful like a razor. You're as beautiful as that wine you opened last night. Warm and light."

Caroline laughed, her sultry smile completely restored. "And oh so good going down?"

Toni gasped with laughter and was glad the waiter had reappeared. Choices were discussed and as always Toni liked that Caroline knew exactly what she wanted and would enjoy. "Tiger prawns in spicy remoulade?"

"I'm feeling very like that tonight." Caroline glanced at the waiter. "Is there an Ardani vintage you'd recommend for our main course?"

But as always with Caroline, Toni reflected, there was a moment when she didn't know if she was being nice or just being the Caroline who could combine nice with just a touch of spite. Did Caroline suspect that the Ardani review was turning out to be painful for her? She liked the old man, she really did, and yet there was no money to bail them out.

The wine was ordered with no input from Toni and she decided

that Caroline had meant to compliment, not annoy. “That dress really is a walking crime.”

“It has some secrets. If I move my left shoulder just so . . .” Caroline gave a little shrug as a hint. “The entire thing will end up around my ankles, and wouldn’t that be a shame?”

“I don’t think anyone with eyes would mind.”

“What about you?”

“I appreciate beauty and art.”

Toni could tell that wasn’t quite what Caroline wanted but she let it go. The meal was delicious and wonderfully presented. Caroline’s pleasure in the food was engaging as always. They shared tastes and stories of mutual friends and Toni even found herself telling Caroline how close Mira had come to wearing her salad on their last so-called date.

They were finishing the fifteen-year-old Ardani Cabernet Sauvignon as the waiter cleared their entrée plates. “You know I’m not much of a wine drinker,” Toni said, “but I can really taste the difference with this one.”

“Compared to that little wine last night? It was tasty enough but, yes, this one is in a different league.” Caroline held her half-full glass up to the candlelight and the deep cherry-burgundy color blossomed into a multi-layered shimmer of pinks and reds. “Not that I want to be grateful to Syrah Ardani for anything.”

“Why not?”

“As if you don’t know. You went on and on about her fine eyes.”

“I did not.”

Caroline took a slow sip from the glass, her gaze never leaving Toni’s face. “I’ve known you ten years, at least, and you’ve never said a word about any woman’s eyes. So mentioning them at all is tantamount to a love letter.”

“I’ve never mentioned your eyes?” Careful, Toni, a little voice said, but something about the wine made the cautious voice very faint. “I’m no poet. Right now I can’t think of any other word than blue, but they are beautifully blue. Don’t tell Missy, but I like your eyes better than hers.”

Caroline blinked. "Don't play with me, Toni. I thought you'd agreed to be honest, even if I don't like the truth."

"I am being honest."

"I think if you just gave us a chance, we could find something more than me fishing for compliments and you being just tipsy enough to give them."

Was she tipsy? She gazed into the depths of her wine, wondering if it was higher in alcohol content than she anticipated. Away from the candle the deep reds seemed almost black and she fancied she saw a flash of gold. They *were* fine eyes. She ought to tell her father he'd been right about a little girl who had grown up to become Sophia Loren. "I don't think I'm drunk."

"Maybe not drunk, but you did flush, just now."

"It must be the peppery aftertaste."

"Just a few days and you've picked up all the lingo." Caroline wasn't really smiling.

Dessert, a delicate caramel brulee with apricots poached in white wine, seemed to melt in her mouth. She was indeed tipsy, Toni realized, and dwelling far too much on Caroline's undeniable charms. Caroline was no angel but she didn't deserve to be used merely because Toni was suddenly aware of how long it had been since she'd felt a woman's body against her own. Mira had been adventurous and Toni suspected Caroline wasn't shy. That Caroline had made it plain she wanted Toni didn't make it smart to give in.

"Let's walk a bit," Caroline said. "I don't think either of us should drive right now."

Caroline's hand through Toni's silk blouse felt warm and familiar. Yountville's small town square wasn't far but most of the shops had closed. The streets were slowly going quiet.

"How much longer do you think you'll be here?" Caroline paused to look at artisan glasswork in a window.

"Just one more day at the winery. Then I can do my report for the court."

"So you're going home."

"I do need to get back, but with satellite hookups and wireless connections, nobody is missing me. As you noticed, I'm on the phone a lot." Doc Burbidge was eager for her to dig into his proposed merger, but she could easily do half the analysis next to the now sparkling pool for a day or two. Her team members knew where she was and the staple of her seven a.m. hour was a long talk with the Admin Queens.

"I'd like to think you're staying because of the scenery." Caroline turned from the window, her tight silk dress slipping a little on her left shoulder.

Oh, hell, Toni thought, too late, because Caroline was already on her tiptoes, pulling Toni down to her for a kiss that was as easy and heady as the wine at dinner had been.

When she could talk, which was several minutes later, she tried to find some reason. "I don't want to lead you on, Caroline. It wouldn't be nice."

"Tonight, I don't think I care about tomorrow."

"Tomorrow you will care about tomorrow." The curve of her shoulders was tantalizing.

Caroline's hand slipped to the back of Toni's neck. "Kiss me again."

She was irresistible, even though Toni knew it was a mistake to kiss her then, to kiss her as they slowly made their way back to her rental car, to kiss her once they were locked inside.

"Toni." Caroline's small moan ignited something inside Toni's mouth and the kiss turned hotly passionate. "I've wanted you for so long."

Toni couldn't say, "Me, too," because it wasn't true. Instead she found a real truth, which was, "I know."

"Touch me."

"Cari, we shouldn't do this."

"I don't care." The next kiss bruised Toni's lips. "I want your hands on me, Toni. I don't care who you're thinking about, or what. Just make love to me tonight."

There were alarm bells, deep down, sounding like an urgent

order to sell the stock before she got burned. The prospect of getting burned was too pleasurable and the heat she found as Caroline straddled her was too tempting. Her fingers tingled and Caroline's sharp cry made the bells go away.

"Please, there." Tears were choking Caroline's voice and Toni shushed her.

"It's okay, it's okay."

"Please," Caroline gasped. "Toni, please."

Caroline ground down on Toni's palm with a ferocity that made Toni momentarily pull back. Then Caroline's hand was wrapped around her forearm, pulling Toni hard against her as she shook. Her dress slid off her shoulders, leaving her breasts bare. Toni's fingers ran from collarbone to nipple and they kissed again as Caroline gripped Toni's arm even harder.

"God, yes."

Caroline was beautifully passionate in her abandon and Toni wanted to fall into the depths with her. It had been ages since sex had seemed this simple. But even as she felt yet more wetness against her palm and Caroline froze against her, she realized she had no idea, and had never had any idea, why Caroline was attracted to her. At least it wasn't my money she craved, Toni thought. *Caroline is not Mira wanting my checkbook more than me.*

She cuddled Caroline against her, shushing the soft tears and feeling like a cad. This obviously meant something to Caroline.

She finally found a tissue in the glove box and Caroline blotted her eyes and nose.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to get so emotional. I love the way you touch me, Toni."

"I wasn't even thinking about you," Toni could have said. "At some point, anybody could have done that for you," she might have added, wanting that to be true. Wisely, she said nothing of the kind. Other truths, luckily, were easy to find. "You are beautiful, Caroline."

"Thank you." Caroline melted into her arms and they stayed

like that for several minutes. Finally, she stirred. “You have always excited me.”

“How?” Please don’t let her be in love with me, Toni pleaded silently. She had never wanted to hurt Caroline that way.

Caroline slowly raised her head, her smile slow and sated. “You’re kidding, right?”

“No, I’m not. I don’t try to excite you, I really don’t.”

She laughed. “Well, hell, woman, just think if you did try what might happen.” Her smile slowly faded. “You’re serious.”

“Yeah.”

“You are sexier than the day I met you, and even then you had what it took for me.”

“Whatever that is.”

“You’re complicated. Intelligent, attractive. Powerful, decisive, *tall*.”

“I knew it was genetics.”

“Ten years ago, you didn’t have that line, right there.” Caroline’s thumb traced the curve from Toni’s nose to the corner of her mouth. “I think it’s gorgeous. You have depth and awareness that I just don’t find in many people. I keep hoping that you’ll put those qualities to work on me. On us.”

They kissed sweetly and Caroline shifted on Toni’s lap. “I’m not that complicated,” she demurred.

“Don’t sell yourself short—it’s bad for business.” They kissed again until Caroline drew back. “I have been wondering for so long if you made love the way you analyzed a business deal. Totally rapt, and every ounce of your intelligence focused on the matter at hand.”

She shifted again on Toni’s lap. Toni ignored the invitation. Her head was now too clear. “I don’t know what to say, Caroline. If only something like this was governed by practical rules.”

“We’re so suitable for each other. Same friends, similar background, we like many of the same things, like golf, when you give yourself the time.”

Toni could only think of how her father had never been the same, how part of him had never grown back after her mother died. She'd never loved anyone that way and she'd known Mira wasn't capable of it either. Caroline, though, might be, and playing with her expectations wasn't nice. Softly, she said, "I think it takes more than that."

"How will we know if we don't give it a chance?"

"I think we have." Ten years of occasional meetings and Toni still didn't feel more than she had felt the first day.

"This? Tonight? Oh, Toni, darling, you have no idea what I can do." Caroline's lips slid seductively over Toni's mouth, her tongue soft and nimble. "You have no idea how exhausted you would be by morning. Missy wouldn't need anyone to peel the paint for her—you and I could manage that all on our own."

"Caroline, I'm sorry—"

Caroline's fingertips pressed Toni's lips to a stop. "No, no. Don't you say that. Let's just see what happens, okay? I'll stay as long as you're here."

The drive to Netherfield was silent, and they parted at the bottom of the stairs after one last kiss. She knew Caroline would presume that the longer Toni stayed the more interested she was, and so she ought to finish up her report tomorrow and go home.

The report could have been done in a day.

The last kiss had said that if she wanted she could be in Caroline's bed, even now, but looking at the smears on her slacks in her own bedroom mirror, she knew that wasn't why she wanted to stay in the area. She ought to go home and the reasons she didn't had nothing to do with Missy's sparkling swimming pool. The real reasons were yet too foreign to be given credence. They were unquantifiable and therefore, in the matter of rational choices, they did not exist.

Syrah Ardani avoided her and Toni was not ready to go home.

## Chapter 7

Fed up with the information blackout, Syrah prowled quietly through the papers in her father's office. He was out discussing fertilizer with Carlo. Toni wasn't due for an hour.

Her search turned up nothing of interest, though. Piles of bank statements were just what she expected to see, and the letters from the lenders she'd already read. She had no idea what was taking Toni Blanchard so long—she'd been here three whole days. What was there to know that wasn't already apparent?

She turned on the computer, finally, and printed out orders that had been sent in from distributors. Her e-mail was next and she was surprised to see that something had arrived in her personal box since the previous day. She had nothing against e-mail but a phone call was always preferable to her and all of her friends knew that.

Not recognizing the sender's address she almost didn't open it, but the subject line of "About Toni Blanchard" was simply too hard to resist.



“Dear Ms. Ardani,” she read, hoping it turned out to be something she could quickly delete.

You don’t know me and at this time I cannot give you my name. We have a mutual acquaintance in Toni Blanchard, however. I had the misfortune to have dealings with her in the past of such a painful nature that I cannot tolerate that what happened to me should happen to you as well. I think I might be able to enlighten you about the temperament of this woman, if you are interested in more details. Please write back if so.

It was signed only, “A Friend.”

She didn’t like anonymous letters, and for a moment she remembered all the trouble that had resulted from an unsigned note in high school that purported undying love between two boys. It had been a hoax, and a cruel one, and the coward who’d done it had never fessed up.

She nearly deleted the message but couldn’t. This was her family’s heritage, her livelihood, her father’s entire life. She would take everything with a grain of salt, but knowledge could be power.

She wrote a carefully worded missive back, expressing her misgivings but indicating a willingness to listen. She heard someone coming through the house from the kitchen and quickly closed the mail window.

Toni had been early the three previous mornings and today was no different. Syrah ought not to have been surprised. She was again cool and poised in new jeans and a simple eggplant-hued pullover.

“I was just leaving,” Syrah said quickly.

“Could we talk for just a moment?”

Surprised, she nodded. “I hope you can give me some information. I am capable of understanding what’s going on.”

“I’m sorry about that. If you were a shareholder or member of

the board I could be much more candid. But as it is, you're an employee, technically."

"An employee with grape DNA."

The smile Syrah received in reply was tight. "I am well aware that you are integral to the vineyard and I have been hoping against hope that something would show up unexpectedly, but I've only got one thing I could report to the court as helpful. It's a Band-Aid at best but could buy you time. Your father wasn't very open to the idea, and I didn't understand why. I thought you might be able to shed light on his resistance."

Syrah said firmly, "I'm not going to talk him 'round for you."

"That's not what I want. My proposal was to lease more future grapes. I know next year's leases are committed, but why not the year after that? At least some of them. Enough to bring the loans to within sixty days current. If that's done, the judge will put a stay on the case and the creditors will step back, for a while."

The thought *bad* crossed Syrah's mind, but she knew her father's feelings. "The growers and vintners who could afford that are mass-market producers. It will sound like snobbery, but we don't grow grapes for the mass market."

"Would they pay you what your usual leases would bring?"

"Yes, probably."

"So . . . you don't charge a premium rate for your grapes, you're just picky about who gets them." Surprisingly, Toni didn't seem judgmental, merely reciting back their business practice to be sure she understood.

Syrah nodded. "Essentially, yes. My father can also tell you whose grapes that year will need what from our vines." She tried to speak without undue pride, but she was very proud of her father's reputation. "There are those who think my father has elevated the overall quality of wine produced from this region in his lifetime."

"I understand."

Syrah didn't believe Toni possibly could, not after a couple of days. "Every harvest is different. Every time the vines produce it's another chance."

"I do understand. Thank you for explaining it to me. Your father was not so forthcoming."

"We've been called snobs and it isn't easy to tell an old friend he can't have your zins that year."

Toni said softly, "I can imagine that would be difficult for him."

"So, if he agrees, it's just a Band-Aid? He'd give up a whole year for no guarantees?"

Something in Toni's eyes flinched, but she continued to meet Syrah's gaze. "If nothing is done, I can guarantee that you'll have to sell more than half your land, based on the most recent appraisals."

Syrah swallowed hard. "I don't know what went wrong. I wasn't here."

"I wish I could explain more."

"Sure you do." Syrah was almost out the door when she made herself stop. "I'm sorry, that was rude."

"It's okay." Toni was already looking at her laptop screen. "I know this isn't easy."

As she picked up her satchel, Syrah noticed a series of bruises on Toni's forearm. Four bruises, more or less in a row. Fresh bruises. Syrah was certain if she turned Toni's arm over, she would find an opposing fifth to complete the picture.

Was that why Toni seemed nicer this morning? Had she gotten laid? Three days of stumbling over the woman and Syrah had only received dour looks. There was only one candidate to have done the honors, but Syrah didn't feel at all thankful to Caroline Bingley.

Fertilizer, she thought. *I don't need this. She's nothing to me, and she can have every woman in town for all I care.* What was it about that hostile, haughty air, anyway?

The walk through the vineyard calmed her nerves as it always did. Grapes were still tight, small and bright green, but soon they'd hang lower and heavier and she and her father would begin assessing water content and anxiously studying advance weather reports.

She would hate to give up any of them to an unknown fate, but there didn't seem to be any other way.

She could have been blind and known she'd reached the latest fertilizer site by her nose alone. The full day's sun wasn't yet on them, but the air was dank with nitrogen and sulfur. Two crowds of workers were ready to begin walking mulch down the rows while others followed to press the mix in.

"Phew! You guys stink," Syrah announced, repeating herself in her marginal Spanish. She was happy to pitch in for a while, losing her worries in caring for the vines. When she found herself with her father for a few moments' privacy, she said, "I think she's right, Dad. It's hard, but it would buy us time. This is going to be an exceptional harvest." Though she didn't believe it, she added, "We could get lucky."

"I know. I'm trying to square it in my mind. Which grapes, though? I don't want to lose control of the zins, Pinots or Syrahs."

"But the zins are our biggest crop."

"Exactly."

"Dad, I know it's drastic."

"It's never a good idea to pay for today with tomorrow."

Syrah could only nod. It seemed like sound advice for life, not just grapes.

"I shouldn't have bought the Tarpay fields, and with the grapes on them pledged to the sellers for two years we're paying interest on the loans with no income against it. I was anxious to get hold of them and overpaid."

"And that was after all the modernizing and upgrading."

"We needed those new barrels."

But maybe they hadn't needed the new bottling equipment. She'd thought the old one had another ten years on it at least. "I'll tell her, if you want me to."

"No, I'll do it. She shouldn't have brought you into it."

More sharply than she meant to, Syrah asked, "Why not, Dad? Someday these will be my decisions to make."

"I know, pumpkin, but you're still young. I was glad to see you go to Europe. You don't need to be married to this place yet."

"Dad, I already am. I was born married to this place. I bleed grape juice, just like you."

He laughed a little. "I'll try to remember. Seems like yesterday you were going to the prom."

"I'm thirty-one, Dad. I'm all out of proms."

"Guess I'd better go talk to Toni, hadn't I?"

"Might be good. Shall I walk back with you?"

"Sure."

From the patio outside the tasting room, Toni watched the two Ardanis making their way toward the house. Yesterday she might have thought they were blissfully unaware of their woes, but both knew some of what they were up against. Still, they paused to talk over the vines, the father occasionally emphasizing a point with a gesture of his right hand. Both handled the plants as if the vines were infants. She was beginning to suspect that neither could walk past a vine without stopping to touch it and think about its future.

Corporations were, however, all alike in the ways that mattered. She couldn't allow herself to get caught up in the vagaries of their business. Syrah was picking a grape now and apparently tasting it. Whatever the result, it made her laugh and the peal of it carried up the hill.

Toni carried her coffee back inside, banishing the image of Syrah's dark hair glinting in the sunlight. She tried to make herself think about Caroline, about Mira, about her schedule, her work, but she could still hear Syrah's laugh. Syrah was young, she reminded herself, young and not jaded and tired from too much money and too many people.

A truck laden with workers on their way to fields below passed the office window and Toni recognized the slices of pesto-brushed toast from Bennett's kitchen they all carried. Yesterday she might have dared to suggest the economy of not paying for a personal

chef, though she'd known the woman's role was far more than that. Bennett was as tightly woven into this family as the family was to the grapes.

Remove the emotion, she reminded herself, and what to do about the money becomes clear. If the Ardanis wanted to buy some time, they needed to give up part of their control of the year after next's harvest. She understood it was unpleasant, but then so were foreclosure auctions. They *were* babes in the woods, the vines, whatever. Why had it fallen to her to take their tranquility from them?

Anyone else would have been home by now, report filed and onto the next contract. The recommendation would be simple: sell the major assets and replace management.

She made her way to the kitchen, unsure as always of her welcome. Bennett had made very clear the standards of her hospitality, which was that if one wanted something one asked or she took great offense. She also made plain her belief that Toni was just this side of evil incarnate. Toni figured, with a tiny pull at the waist of her slacks, she was damned either way and the pesto bread looked good.

"Nobody tells me anything around here," Bennett said by way of greeting. "You're like all the rest in that regard."

"I have a duty to the court." She felt a little faint from the pungent aroma of roasted garlic.

Bennett withered her with a glance as she plated a slice of still-bubbling pesto toast with an egg over hard alongside. "It's still an excellent idea to buy time with a future lease. A baby could tell the sense of it, but that doesn't mean Ardani himself can see that."

"You have a knack for acquiring information," Toni said, halfway through the egg after two bites. "Thank you for this and for remembering it over hard. I don't eat breakfast normally, but I've been ravenous since I got here."

"Clean air. I can't imagine how you can breathe in New York City."

"Ever been there?"

“Heavens no. This is home, and I must say more people ought to stay home.”

Ouch, Toni thought. She finished the egg, helped herself to coffee and took the toast to savor as she settled down to work in the office.

By the time the two Ardanis noisily entered the back door of the house, Toni had finalized her five-year expense and debt projections. Neither chart had an advantageous trend.

She surreptitiously licked her fingers and tried not to be swayed by the fact that the best deli near the office in New York would never compare to Bennett’s cooking. She had to go home. She was not getting addicted to country air, or anything else they grew here.

“Good morning, Toni. Hard at work already?”

“You’ve already done a half-day. I feel lazy by comparison.”

“I’m sure you were awake when the markets opened.” Anthony settled into his desk chair, coffee in one hand.

Toni nodded an admission. “But I only had one eye open.”

“Same here.” He sipped from the mug, then said, “Let’s lease some future grapes.”

Astonished by how pleased she was to hear him say that, Toni found herself grinning. “I know you don’t want to, but time is hard to buy and that’s what we’ll get.”

Bennett bustled in with a plate and bustled out again saying, “Finally you’re talking some sense, I must say.”

“Glad to know you’re happy,” Anthony called after her. “The woman’s a menace, weaned on a pickle.”

“I heard that, you curmudgeon. Get your own coffee from now on.”

Toni fought down her own laughter, not able to recall when she’d felt so relaxed. It was a dangerous feeling, she knew that, and yet she couldn’t conquer it. Not right then, with the cool, clean air blowing in from the open patio door, not with Syrah framed in the light, leaning comfortably against the jamb as she gazed out at the rolling fields.

I've caught something from Missy, she thought. "How can we get that process started?"

"I'll call a couple of people and invite them for a glass of vino and a casual auction. They'll call a few and end of day we'll see what happens."

Toni blinked at the rapidity of it. "Aren't there papers to be drawn up?"

"Got the boilerplates in this machine. I just need to write up the zones I'm willing to part with. It has to be the zins. Everybody can benefit from our zins."

Nodding, Toni left him to work as she adjusted her projections. Using the last two years' results of leases, she made a conservative estimate based on a few questions.

She was aware of Anthony Ardani's pride as he made those few phone calls. She guessed it was the first time he'd said the words "cash flow" to people he had to consider colleagues.

Wanting to give him privacy for his painful task, she took her cell phone outside to field calls from the office and paced the patio as she talked. Syrah Ardani appeared from one of the fermenting barns, then later from around the corner of the house carrying a large basket of vegetables from the garden Bennett tended. The morning wore on, with glimpses of Syrah, who did not seem the least bit like a lazy debutante. Watching Syrah deep in conversation with their manager, she revised her earlier thoughts—Syrah was full of youthful vitality, but she wasn't immature.

She was still clicking through her calls when she heard Jane's voice and then the two women were gone.

Calls concluded a few minutes later, she went back to the office to find Anthony mulling over papers from the printer. "I thought I would wrap up today, but I just spent two hours on other things. If you're going to settle the matter of the future leases I'd like to come back tomorrow so I can make my report as accurate as possible."

It was an excuse, but if Anthony suspected that it didn't show. "Certainly. That makes sense. Would you like to see how the auction goes this evening?"



Toni could think of a thousand things that required her attention but heard herself saying, “That would be fascinating. Six-thirty?”

“Good time,” Anthony agreed. “Thank you, Toni. You’ve been a big help.”

He still didn’t get it, that she wasn’t here to help him. She realized, then, that part of her hoped he never did. She hoped there was a miracle and she didn’t have to be the harbinger of doom, not for this business. Not for this family.

She turned away from the public road as she drove away, unwilling to admit that she knew Syrah and Jane had gone this direction. The rental car interior was hot and choked with Caroline’s perfume, and she rolled down the windows as she slowly drove along the tree-lined dirt road. Two hours to the south was one of the largest metropolitan areas in the country, but the buzz of insects and racket of birds made it hard to believe she wasn’t in a time warp.

She was wasting time, but it seemed more than worth it to coast to a slow stop in a shady wide spot and shut off the engine. The first thing she thought was that the country was noisy, then she was lost in remembering the last summer at the cabin on Lake George. That summer had been painful, but long ago. She simply hadn’t understood that her mother was ill and at eleven had had no way to fathom the concept of “gone forever.”

Her cell phone rang and she quickly dealt with Valerie’s question. She was grateful for the interruption of what would surely have been maudlin thoughts.

One of those country quiets fell. The buzzing ceased and then resumed at half its volume, as if some of the insects had decided on a siesta. In the distance she heard voices, then a scream. Alarmed, she got out of the car and walked through the line of trees. The hill sloped sharply away, too sharply to consider climbing down, but through the spreading branches of oaks she could see two figures—Syrah and Jane, had to be—swimming in a pond. There was

another scream as Jane pulled Syrah under, then they both waded out of the water and out of her sight.

It had been enough, that sight of Syrah. No gymnasium waif, she was as curvaceous and sensual as Toni had dreamed she might be.

Her heart was pounding, and it was silly. She got back in the car, resisting comparisons to Botticelli or Raphael nudes. Syrah was more lean but equally as lush.

Last night she had been passive to Caroline's undeniable, forthright passion. Today, having been aware of Syrah Ardani's every move for hours, her palms were sweating. She felt like an idiot for having twitted Missy about her infatuation. Syrah Ardani did not even like her. How could she be sitting here imagining that body spread out on her bed, that voice rising to cry out her name, and the laughter that would embrace them both when their bodies were exhausted?

Rebound. Dementia. Wine poisoning. There had to be some explanation that made sense. She started the car and continued on the road, realizing too late as she dipped down a curve that she was going to go right past the pond where Syrah and Jane were lazing. Lazing naked.

She reversed as soon as she could, but it took a couple of attempts to turn around. Relieved, she hit the gas and would have made her escape had it not been for a forceful, "Stop that!"

Toni looked in her rearview mirror and beheld Syrah Ardani marching toward her car. She wore only her T-shirt, and it was wet in places that made Toni's mouth go dry.

"What the hell are you doing?" Syrah glared down into the car with such fire in her eyes that Toni was grateful she couldn't look away. Other parts of Syrah were tantalizing her peripheral vision and she wanted to take a long, long look. She shoved her hands under her thighs.

"Trying to go back the other way. I thought this would lead to—"

“You’re kicking up a mile of dust. Ten years from now we’ll be explaining the extra notes of dirt in this year’s Cabernets.”

“Oh.”

“Just go slowly, would you?”

“I will.”

“Good.” Syrah marched away from the car and Toni watched her go. She would have felt humiliated if it weren’t for the beautiful twin curves of Syrah’s backside peeking below the T-shirt hem. With a slight smile she watched them swagger out of sight, then finally began the journey back to the winery and on to Netherfield.

“Why is she here?” Syrah tweaked a cookie off the tray Bennett was setting down on the sideboard in the formal dining room that also served as a meeting room.

Bennett swatted her hand. “I’m sure I don’t know.”

Syrah watched Toni shaking hands with the grower representative from the largest collective in the Napa-Sonoma counties. It had felt good to have a real reason to yell at Toni this afternoon, even if, when she’d gotten back to the pond, Jane had pointed out the impairment a lack of panties dealt to one’s dignity.

She munched on the cookie—shortbread, her favorite—as she approached the tasting room, then used a piece of it to lure Hound outside and onto his chain. They were now officially closed and glasses of last year’s table zinfandel were being offered and accepted. She slipped into place next to her father and poured a few more glasses, handing them out as she said hello.

When Toni stepped up to the bar, Syrah handed her a glass. “There aren’t any notes of dirt in this batch.”

“Really?” Toni sipped appreciatively. “No city slicker messing up the grapes that year?”

Syrah was uncomfortably aware that Toni was laughing at her, and she did not want to blush. “Not that year, no.”

“All I can say is that if rules were enforced by women in such fetching uniforms, we’d all behave ourselves.”

Syrah blushed. "I was protecting the grapes. That's one of the fields we'll be leasing today."

"Toni, dear, there's someone I want you to meet." Syrah watched her father drag Toni over to meet another grower and heard him say, "Toni is the daughter of an old family friend and is helping us out with business matters. I thought she'd be interested in how we handle something like this."

"A pleasure to meet you, Ms. Blanchard. I've read so much about you," the grower enthused.

Toni said something in reply that made everyone laugh and her father beamed.

As if she was an invited guest, Syrah thought, and not running from here to a judge to explain how they'd found a way to keep their heads above rising water. She didn't know why she had to remind herself so forcefully of Toni's role, but she knew it had nothing whatsoever to do with the way that Toni's hands moved as she talked, or the warm, low tone of her laughter.

Syrah plastered a smile on her face and circulated through the room, taking some satisfaction from the turnout. There were at least twenty interests represented here, and that meant they'd get a fair price even at the short notice. Properly advertising and doing a public auction might get them more, but after the costs they would likely net the same amount.

Bennett appeared from the hallway that led to the dining room and gave a significant harrumph. Syrah shooed people in that direction, promising warm shortbread and other tasty things.

Toni remained at the door, and since Syrah didn't want to take a chair from a bidder, she lingered there as well. Some people had to stand anyway, but no one seemed to mind. The bowl of note cards and envelopes was passed from party to party, and in a few minutes pencils had made their notes and envelopes were tucked shut. Syrah took a second bowl around the table to collect the cards, then set it in front of her father.

When she rejoined Toni at the door, Toni whispered, "Is it really this easy?"

"It is for us." She shrugged. "Public auctions are much more tense, with multiple sales and everyone having contingencies. You know, if they don't get their first choice they then need to shore up their bids to fill in what they didn't get. This is one deal and a known quantity. The Bench, Alexander Ridge, Lime Flat—they all know exactly what those plots are."

"Gotcha."

The growers chatted among themselves while her father opened the envelopes and arranged the bids from high to low. By the time he finished most of the wine and all of the cookies were gone.

"This is very gratifying. Thank you all for your serious bids." He quickly named the five top bidders.

"Oh, well," one of the losers said genially on his way out. "It was a long shot. I hoped nobody else would have heard. There's no way I could afford anything off of Ardani Bench."

"Me, too. I stayed for the cookies." A woman Syrah didn't know paused to hand her a business card. "If there's another auction of this kind, do let me know. And I love shortbread."

"I'll remember." Syrah smiled back, vaguely wondering if she was being flirted with.

Toni said, her lips stiff with an obvious effort not to smile, "I think she likes your vines."

"It's just business."

"What would a woman have to do to get you to realize she's flirting with you?"

Syrah wondered why Toni wanted to know such a thing. It wasn't as if . . . Her heart was suddenly pounding. "It doesn't happen all that often."

"That you notice."

Alarmed, and not sure why, Syrah concentrated on the activity in the dining room. The five top bidders were filling out new cards, having been told what the previous high bid was. She already suspected that the lease would go to the collective representative. Her father wouldn't be all that happy; the collective

often then sold their residuals to the big conglomerates. It wasn't to be helped. She sighed.

"This isn't easy for your father."

"No." For me either, Syrah could have added. Things weren't supposed to change, not like this. Nature could make change but when people forced change it never felt right to Syrah. "How are you enjoying Napa?"

"I'll admit it's beautiful here. We had a delicious dinner last night at French Laundry."

Syrah was nonplussed. "Really? How did you pull that off?"

"It wasn't me. Caroline can be ingenious when she wants to be."

Good for Caroline, Syrah thought. She glanced again at the bruises on Toni's arm and when she tore her gaze away she realized Toni had caught her looking.

Syrah couldn't begin to decipher the expression on Toni's face. It wasn't a blush, and it wasn't shy admission. It was . . . uncomfortable. She couldn't pry into it, so she asked, "Do you have other business in the area?"

"No, not right now. There is a rumor of a client working out an acquisition in Los Angeles, but I'm well aware that's not really the same state."

Syrah snickered. "You understand Northern California attitudes too well, perhaps."

"That or I'm too cozy with Southern California business interests. Since the Silicon Valley crash there hasn't been the same kind of activity up here to give me balance."

They stopped talking as her father began opening the next round of envelopes. "We have a clear leader this time." He stated the top bid and two of the growers put up their hands in resignation. "One more round?" He glanced at the remaining three.

"I think I'm done, too, much as I hate to be," another man said.

Syrah walked them out, thanking them along the way for their efforts. By the time she returned to the dining room, everyone was shaking hands and her father had a mixed look of pleasure and

regret on his face. As Syrah had expected, the collective had won the bid.

"It was fifteen percent more than I thought it would be," Toni said in a low voice. "Excellent."

"That's good news."

"It is. I'm going to see what happens if I project forward five more years of lease—"

"I don't think Dad will agree, I really don't. He's dying inside." Syrah hadn't meant to say so much but at least Toni was nodding with understanding.

"I know. At least we can see how it pencils."

Papers were being signed and then her father walked the two other men to the door. Syrah found herself abruptly alone with Toni and could think about nothing but the fact that Toni had seen her with no panties on this afternoon and what Toni might have been doing to Caroline to get those kinds of bruises on her arm.

"Have dinner with me," Toni said suddenly.

Syrah blinked. "Why?"

Toni's mouth tightened but Syrah didn't know if it was laughter or annoyance. She supposed her blunt question had been a little rude. "Because a girl's gotta eat and I don't know where is good."

"I don't think I can get us into French Laundry."

"Good. It was delicious but far too rich to do every night. Bennett's food is also starting to show on my waistline."

Syrah couldn't help but look. She had no control over her eyes as she studied the flat stomach, lean hips and long, long legs. She brushed her hand over her own stomach. "Oh, you've a ways to go to catch me. I need to stick to a diet."

"No, you don't."

Toni's low tone caught Syrah off-guard. Was Toni flirting with her? No, it was just polite conversation, she thought. She didn't want Toni Blanchard to flirt with her, not at all. "Let me clean up a little, then sure."

In her room, Syrah discarded the T-shirt that had been treacherously too short, and pulled on a red short-sleeved sweater. She

brushed her hair, pulling it back into a ponytail. Recalling Caroline Bingley's perfect brows she quickly plucked a few stray hairs, then decided she did not have time for an all-day makeover.

She frowned at herself in the mirror. "This will have to do."

"Have fun," her father called.

It was surreal, sitting in Toni Blanchard's rental car, her father's words ringing in her ears. She had no expectation of having "fun" but her heart was pounding nonetheless. Exactly what was she doing, then?



## Chapter 8

“To tell you the truth, I’d like a drink. From a bar where it’s dark, the music is low and the French fries are served with ketchup.” Toni gripped the steering wheel with both hands to keep her palms from sliding on it. A drink was probably not the best idea, but she could think of nothing else to say now that Syrah’s thigh was a mere six inches from her own.

This feeling inside was ridiculous. She was not fifteen and dying over her first girl.

Syrah was gazing out her window, but Toni thought she heard a hint of a smile in her tone. “I think I know just the place. Go north on the highway to Trancas and head east.”

“Gotcha.” *What’s wrong with me, what’s wrong with me*—the refrain wouldn’t stop. “I’m glad the auction went well, I really am.”

“Obviously, I am, too.” Syrah shifted her position so she was now looking at Toni. “I don’t mean this as rudely as it sounds, but what’s in this for you?”

“In what?”

“What you do. I understand money of course, and I don’t think that’s a bad thing, mostly.”

“A girl’s got a right to make a living, doesn’t she?” Toni gave Syrah an arch look.

“Yes, of course. But why this living?”

“Good question. I intended to go into business law, but I was just about finished with grad school before I grew up and realized my interest was mostly about following in my father’s footsteps. He’s a judge.”

“I think my father mentioned that. I understand the compulsion to want to follow on well-trod ground. I certainly have.”

“You have grape DNA, right?”

“You’re quoting my father.” Syrah looked down at her hands. “I enjoy spreading manure sometimes. Other times it’s the chemistry of it.”

Toni had to force her gaze back to the road. Syrah’s fingers were as shapely as the rest of her. “I finished the law degree, and it has certainly come in handy. But my first job out of college was with a crook who treated everyone and everything, including me, like a slot machine. Fiddle with it just so, and it pays off for you.”

“What did you do?”

“I quit and found another company and the story was much the same. Eventually I freelanced and got to pick and choose. I was lucky in the form of a patron, a friend of my father’s. He brought me a chunk of business as a test and when that worked, we went on to bigger and better things. I got flat-out lucky, made a bundle in something I had put my own money into and life, generally, has been good.”

“Lots of travel? Adventure?”

Toni grinned. “Lots of hotels and bad food. That’s been a delightful change about this trip.”

“Netherfield is a lovely old home. I don’t know if it’s true, but there was a story about its being located on the spot where the first Spanish land grant for the valley was signed.”

"I like it. At first I thought Missy was crazy, but it has many charms."

"More than one, yes."

Wondering what that cryptic comment meant, Toni was about to ask when she realized the exit she wanted was coming up. Syrah pointed out the way and they left the main highway behind in favor of a more suburban setting. Stores with matching facades and familiar names gave way to older buildings and a farmer's market. They arrived at an aging strip mall and headed toward a heavy door under a sign with a blinking martini glass.

"This is Nate's. I don't know what it's really called," Syrah added hastily, "but it's run by Nate. Doesn't matter who's behind the bar, the tag says *Nate*."

Toni liked it immediately. The bar was long, worn but well-polished, and the ceiling was strung closely with hundreds of glass prisms. The low light shimmered as if supplied by candles. Banked behind the bar was a wide variety of spirits. A clatter at the far end promised a kitchen of some kind and she quickly identified the aroma of French fries and possibly fried cod. "This is perfect."

"They make a great Reuben or grilled cheese, and the fish and chips are good if you're in the mood. That's the whole menu by the way. There was a foray into cheese sticks a few years back, but it didn't sit well with the regulars."

"Would that include you?" Toni gently pressed her hand to Syrah's back as they followed the bartender's gesture toward a booth.

"No, afraid not. I've just been here on the occasional late night, when everything else is closed." Syrah slid into the booth with a relieved sigh. "This is just what I needed, too. Sometimes living where you work can be a little stifling."

It had taken a great effort not to run her hand up Syrah's spine in time to the slow, silky jazz that oozed from the speakers. "Why did you go to Europe? You were away for, what, four years?"

Syrah's expression shuttered. "How did you know that?"

"Your father told me." She knew Syrah was a good dancer, but the kind of dancing Toni couldn't seem to stop thinking about wasn't upright.

Syrah eased into a slight smile. "I didn't want to be an Ardani. I was certain there was more to life than that, and more to wine-making than the way we did it. So I went to France, primarily, and apprenticed in several places."

"Did you get what you wanted out of it?"

"You ask very probing questions."

"Sorry." The arrival of the bartender startled Toni but she recovered quickly. "Tennessee whiskey, neat."

"Daniels or Dickel?" The bartender—Nate, the nametag said—swiped the table in front of them with a towel that had at one time been white.

"Dickel. And a glass of ginger ale." She nodded at Syrah.

"A mudslide, heavy on the mud."

The bartender grunted and walked off, leaving Toni to remark, "A milkshake in a place like this?"

"It's more than a milkshake," Syrah chided. "It's got alcohol in it."

"It's grownup chocolate milk, frozen."

Syrah sat back against the cushion. "Did I criticize you for choosing a distillate of corn mash? One could argue it's a grownup breakfast cereal."

"Works for me." Toni tried to relax but found herself leaning on the table so she could better see Syrah's expression. "You didn't answer my question."

"About?"

"Europe. Did you get what you wanted out of it?"

"Yes and no. I learned a lot about wine. When I got home I was more of an Ardani than ever."

"Was that so bad?"

"It only seemed so for a while. I wasn't ready to come home but I am very glad that I did."