

*WOMAN*

*WINE*

*By*

*Eve Ryman-Stimme*

CHAPTER ONE:  
THE DREAM

*“Wine. Because no great story ever started with someone eating a salad.”*

-Author Unknown

*“He who knows how to taste does not drink wine but savours secrets”*

- Salvador Dalì

We, the Watchers, can see his face.

In fact, all we can see is his face. We are looking at him up close and personal. And what we can gather from looking at him, is that his mind is very far away. He is imagining something. Or remembering something, perhaps. His eyes gaze off into the distance, staring intently at nothing. And he is, of course, sipping a glass of red wine.

He is listening to the person on the other end of the video call, and yes, he is ignoring them, at the same time.

“Tell me about the dream,” says the disembodied voice talking out of the computer screen. The request makes him smile. And he begins to speak, haltingly at first.

“Well, in the dream, I am married to Nicole Kidman. She is pregnant, she is very deep into labor, and I guess I did not mention, we had decided to have the baby here, in our own bedroom, not in some cold, sterile hospital.”

“You mean, in your castle? Nice. A humble little home birth.”

“Something like that. Anyway, the midwife is here. Best midwife in the country, I saw to that. If Nicky was going to have this baby at home, I was going to make sure that nothing was going to go wrong. And you have to picture the scene. Already, even before the baby is born, there are flowers everywhere. I made certain of that. My wife is in our grand master bedroom, with an eiderdown comforter and fluffy pillows all around her. And there is a roaring fire in the fireplace, because it's snowing outside.”

“This is like something out of a novel,” said the disembodied voice on the Skype call. It was a sultry, yet matter-of-factly female voice.

“Oh, you have no idea. So, anyway, the baby is just about to be born, all three of us in the room know it. Nicky is screaming and grunting and sweating and panting, like some beautiful primal beast. I am in the room, but I can't bring myself to look; I am pacing, drinking a glass of port, while the midwife is attending to Nicole.”

He smiles, reliving the dream, then continues his narrative:

“Suddenly, the midwife announces, 'It's crowning!' and she's shouting instructions, 'Breathe! Push! Keep pushing! Give me one more big push,' she says, and I have to admit, this midwife had a very encouraging and comforting way about her. Then, suddenly, I hear this last animal sound from my sweet Nicky, a kind of a bellowing. And I look over to see what is happening, because that sound she made was so strange, and then it happened. My wife gave

birth, but not to a baby. Rather, she gave birth to a beautiful, healthy, bouncing bottle of wine.”

There is a strained silence emanating from the computer. The person on the other end of the call says nothing for a long moment. Finally, she speaks.

“That dream is weird as all fuck.”

“True that. But the dream isn't quite over. The next thing I know, the midwife, who is cooing at this glistening bottle of wine, wraps it in swaddling clothes, wipes it off a bit, and she looks at me, beaming. Then she says 'Congratulations, Dr. Stein. It's an Yvone Metras Fleurie L'ultima! A lovely Beaujolais sir, you should be a very proud papa. You can call her “Fleurie” for short. That's French for “covered in flowers”. What a lovely name!' The midwife then hands me the bouncing baby bottle of wine, and I look down on it, and I'm just so proud. Point of fact: nothing about this seemed weird to me.”

After another long silence, the voice from the Skype screen spoke:

“You know, you'd almost think that an ultrasound would have picked up something like that.”

Finally, for the first time, the man's face bursts into big smiles, and he guffaws loudly at her comment.

“I think the key here, Ms. Campbell, is to remember that this was all just a dream.”

“Fine, but that said, have you considered that you may need therapy?”

“You're talking very cheeky, for somebody who wants to have an exclusive interview with me. And besides, there's really nothing that weird about the dream at all. You see, I know exactly what prompted it. All of the elements, that is to say. The matter of fine wine, for example. Sampling many exquisite wines had been very much a part of my long weekend. And I mean

very fine wine. You know, those vintners who always refer to batches as their baby, and think of the harvest wines as their children? And then, the next element--last night, I had a young lady over. A woman I have been seeing for some time. We were in bed, watching TV, and we were taking in the new Nicole Kidman movie. You know, the one where she plays a former undercover police officer, and she's in her forties or something, and she looks really rough. No glamour about her. I mean, if you didn't know her, and you saw her in this movie, you would never believe for a moment that she was this big movie star."

"I think that's the idea," said the phone voice, "I think that's why they call it 'acting', doctor."

"Well, you know what I mean. And please, call me Frankie. But I was talking about Nicole Kidman. She's always so glamorous, with those beautiful gowns at the award ceremonies and playing these parts like Princess Grace of Monaco. And Lady Sarah Ashley. She's old school Hollywood. I hate to see her let herself go, just for a part in a movie. So sad . . ."

"What a horribly misogynistic thing to say! I can see why nobody has ever agreed to marry you."

"Well, that just shows how much you know. Many women have asked to marry me; in fact, I'm considered quite a catch. It's just that--well, frankly, I've been waiting for the chance to sweep you off your feet. My God, how I love an intelligent woman. What is this, half a dozen times we've talked on the phone, come to sparring like this, yet I still haven't met you in person?"

"You were talking about the dream. So you have this big wine weekend, and you're watching the new Nicole Kidman movie."

"Yes, and that thing you said about me being horribly misogynistic. That's almost exactly what my--well, I guess you wouldn't exactly call her my girlfriend--but anyway, that's exactly what she said. We had a little fight about it. It all started because I was watching all of these old Nicole Kidman

movies, Movies on Demand, you know, the ones where she looks so really glamorous. So my date, who's with me in bed, gets annoyed and says that she wants to watch 'Call the Midwife'. She loves that show. That explains a lot about her. Well as it happens, I have this arrangement in my bed, it's a California king, where a flat screen rises up at the foot of the bed, by remote control. But I have learned, after many years of dating, that oftentimes people like to watch different things before they go to sleep at night. So, the bed has a mechanism where one person can pull up their own screen, kind of like dual controls on a big electric blanket, and they can watch what they want to watch. And then, and this is sort of a throwback to the days of bundling, there's this little partition that comes up between the two people, so they don't disturb each other when they're watching their own individual thing. Get it?"

"That is the most unromantic bedroom behavior I've ever heard of."

"Well then, for a big reporter, you are very sheltered. Anyway, that's why I don't think the dream is crazy at all. The elements are all there. Exquisite, expensive wine for days, and I have Nicole Kidman on the brain, and even though there's this partition, every ten minutes I can hear the wailing and screaming and crying of some baby being born on 'Call the Midwife'."

"Doesn't this grand system have dual headphones?"

"Yes, it does, but my girlfriend ... I mean, this lady who's in my life right now, she has this funny quirk. She always thinks the headphones are plugged in, but they never are. It used to be endearing. But now, it's just one of the reasons that I ... well, you know. You're single, I'm sure you've been there."

There is a pause, then a sigh. The throaty woman's voice continues over the wireless:

"Well, thank you for sharing that dream with me. And now, unless you have any objections, my plan is to be there in an hour. I assume that's okay?"

"Of course. I have been looking forward to this for longer than you know. But you do remember the conditions?"

“Francis, I am not going to--”

“Call me Frank. Frankie, whatever, just not Francis. I'm no saint.”

“Whatever. Look, I am *not* spending the night.”

“Those are my terms.”

“There is no reason for me to spend the night to get this interview.”

“I disagree. If you think my sights are set on bedding you, you're wrong. You assume too much. It's just that, as you know, my castle is reputed to be haunted. And you can't really understand me, or my work, or my home, unless you spend the night here. You said yourself when we first spoke that you wanted to see the famous ghosts of Shadowstone Castle.”

“Okay fine, but my boyfriend is going to join me later this evening.”

“No he's not. You just did an interview for the Times in which you discussed how happily single you were. And you couldn't imagine that changing. So, you spend the night in a haunted castle. Those are my terms.”

There was a brief pause on the other end of the call.

“Okay. All right.”

Nothing else. Even the silence sounded irritated.

CHAPTER TWO:  
THE CASTLE CALLS

*“He who loves not women, wine, and song,  
Remains a fool his whole life long.”*

*-Martin Luther*

*“We are all mortal, until the first kiss ... and the second glass of wine..”*

*-Eduardo Galiono.*

Five minutes later, he was outside in the crisp morning air, strolling across his vast front lawn. He sat down on the old cement bench. He could remember doing this very same thing when he was a boy in this house. He was neither surprised nor alarmed at the glimpses of ghosts that appeared here and there, keeping their distance among the greenery. Some of them were thinner, more diaphanous than they had been in his youth. It was as though they were tired of being ghosts, but somehow not yet ready to move on to the other realm. . . as though they were not quite ready to embrace the role of perfected soul.

And yet, he had noticed in the last few weeks and months, that new spirits were injecting and investing themselves into this property. Into his life.



They were much more colorful. And they did not resemble human beings, as much as they were just sprites of color. He did not know what they wanted. He did not concern himself about what to do with them. He was accustomed to all of this, and he rarely let them interfere with his day to day existence. One could get used to just about anything, he had learned.

He watched her drive up in her vintage '57 Chevy. It was one of four that she owned, and it was, for lack of a better phrase, her signature thing. And they were all pristine classics, the four most iconic color pairings. It was impossible for her to look at them and not think, "Thank God I own four. I could never choose just one color combo." She would proudly recount them, when asked:

Matador Red/ India Ivory--for driving to interviews and power lunches. It never seemed overkill to wear red while driving it.

Onyx Black/ India Ivory--the classic, for her evenings on the town. Went well with black tie, and most evening dresses.

Larkspur Blue/ India Ivory--clearly for beach days, and for news stories that took place at the ocean. Lakes too.

And lastly, the rare, deeply gorgeous Highland Green/ Surf Green, for her hippie, earth mother moods.

Carole Campbell was not a wealthy woman, but she put great store by her '57 Chevys. Her father had loved them, and she had inherited them. In point of fact, she had only inherited two of the four, but her sister, who had been a famous actress back in the day, had given Carole the other two. She did not want the cars, and did not need the money. This was before the tragedy, and had nothing to do with her sister's will.

Today, Carole arrived in Matador Red over India Ivory.

Carole glided out of the car like a jazz ride. Frankie had always been amazed by this creature. He tried to look casual and confident as he sauntered up to her.

“How was your drive?”

“How is any drive in a car like that?”

“I'm glad I finally got to see you in it, in the flesh. Your relationship with that car has lasted longer than any relationship I've ever been in.”

“Well, I have to confess, I do love it.”

“You know, I have had a crush on you ever since you first debuted on air as weather girl in that little station out of Schenectady.”

“Oh my gosh, you make me feel so old.”

“ Yes, but let's keep in mind that you premiered as a weather girl when you were only fifteen years old. You had already graduated from high school, and you were in college, majoring in meteorology. You were just too cute to resist, and the television station landed a major coup when they got you to come on as their weather girl. That was a genius decision, ratings went through the roof, and you did turn out to be irresistible.”

“Well, when you put it that way. . .but I didn't come here to talk about me. Let's get the name thing out of the way.”

“Oh God, not that tired topic. I've addressed it thousand times.”

“But, we always have new viewers. And they'll want to hear it from the horse's mouth. Do it for me? Your favorite weather girl? Doctor, why in the hell did your parents name you Frankie. Frankie Stein? Seriously?”

“I'll tell your viewers what I have said every time somebody asks me that. There are hundreds of us on social media, by the way. Unfortunate kids whose parents with the last name ‘Stein’ thought it would be hilarious to name their kids ‘Frankie.’ Sort of a ‘Rocky Horror Picture Show’ thing.”

“Let's keep this personal, doc.”

My parents were scientists, I grew up with an interest in science, and they knew full well that scientists, what do we call them these days--geeks, nerds? They knew it would be hard enough growing up with that bespectacled cross to bear. So they figured, in their genius, that by giving me such a humiliatingly goofy name, I would learn how to bear it early. And bear it well.”

“You mean, like the song?”

“Yes. Johnny Cash, ‘A boy named Sue.’ Agh! So sick of this story.”

“So your life is basically an old country and western song?”

“Yes, and my parents’ psychology worked. I have become a terrifying tower of strength, as you can see. Woe to the man who humiliates me. Or the woman, Ms. Campbell. You’re all prisoners of my evil thrall!”

“Please, call me Carole.”

“Call me Frankie. Doctor Frankie Stein.”

They chuckled in synchronicity, as they turned the corner of a tall hedgerow, and the jaw-dropping edifice came into view. Carole caught her breath. Although she had seen it a thousand times in pictures, seeing it in real life was astonishing.

“Shadowstone Castle. . .” she murmured reverently.

“Home sweet home,” he quipped, opening the tall front doors.

“What, no moat?” she teased.

“I had one, but my lawyer said it was a lawsuit waiting to happen.”

And with a flourish, he ushered her inside, letting Carole get swallowed up by the cavernous foyer.

Five minutes later, they were sitting in the library, flanked by thousands of books. Carole was intimidated by her surroundings (something that rarely happened), but she tried to keep that under wraps. Our intrepid reporter could not help but notice that the vast library--in fact, the entirety of the house that she had glimpsed thus far--had a distinct Steampunk look about it. It might

have been the set from a remake of *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, and she kept feeling that if she glimpsed out the windows, she might not see air, but ocean.

Frankie himself, though, was not intimidating, she observed. He went out of his way to make her feel at ease. He was telling some esoteric joke, the kind that scientists find hilarious, and nobody else understands:

“So the photon says to the bellboy, ‘Oh, I have no luggage--I’m travelling light!’ Get it?”

Carole chuckled, not so much at the joke itself, but at how endearing it was that he was trying to make her comfortable. He was not what she had expected. Not at all.

When he finished his joke, he studied her for a moment, smiling--and then his face changed. He was staring at the chain around her neck.

“Carole, is that a religious icon? I thought you were a proud atheist.”

“No. I never said I don't believe in God. I just take issue with parts of organized religion. That said, there are things that I believe in very strongly.”

“Such as?”

“Hey, who is interviewing who here?”

“Fine. It’s just that your religious medallion intrigued me.”

A look of sadness washed over Carole's face, and Frankie caught it.

“I’m sorry. I certainly didn't mean to upset you.”

“No, you didn't, it's not--it's just that this was my sister's. That is to say, when I found her, she was still clutching this medallion.”

“Oh Carole, please forgive me. I didn't mean to remind you of. . . that must have been a nightmare for you. I thought about getting in touch with you, and sending my condolences, or asking what I could do in her name, but that seemed intrusive. I just can't imagine. And a twin sister, no less.”

Something about Frankie's voice comforted her and she leaned in, feeling relaxed with him. She whispered conspiratorially:

“You know, it's true what they say. I can tell you this, hand to God, they could determine when she died, very close to the hour, and, I swear to you--I woke up in the middle of the night, at the time she died. I know because usually, I sleep so well. Like a baby. Anyway, so here's the thing, she was supposed to start shooting her new movie the very next day. ‘The Madame Curie Story.’ I read the script, really powerful stuff. And I know that my sister was terrified of taking on the role. She had a fast trajectory to fame, and she told me that frankly, she didn't know if she was up to it, if she was good enough to play the role. So it would make perfect sense that she would get this religious medallion. It's Saint Albert Magnus, patron saint of scientists. My sister, my dear Christine, always the method actress. She told me that Marie Curie was raised a staunch Catholic, but lost her faith after her mother and sister both died, when she was only a girl.”

“That's quite a story,” said Frankie. “I remember we studied Albert Magnus, when I was a kid in boarding school in Switzerland. He was quite ahead of his time. Brilliant man. He was a zoologist and a botanist, archeologist, physiologist, phrenologist, a student of astronomy, logic, theology. He was amazing.”

“Overachiever, I'm thinking,” said Carole, smiling ever so slightly. “Anyway, my sister always immersed herself in a role. So it made sense that she'd have this with her. That she would wear it, while she prepared. For weeks, she talked about nothing but Marie Curie. Did you know that she got two Nobel prizes? Two! And that she died when she was sixty-six? That's not young, but she would have lived a lot longer if they'd known anything about radiation back then. My sister told me that Marie used to carry these vials containing radioactive substances around in her pocket, and at night she would be fascinated by the light they emitted. Did you know that her papers, even her personal cookbook, they're all so radioactive that they keep them in a lead lined box, and they have to be handled by people wearing special equipment. A

cookbook! Her story is so sad. Oh, and two duels were fought over Marie Curie! My sister would have been so great in that movie.”

“I'm sure she would have been.”

“But it is also no secret that my sister suffered from harrowing bouts of depression. For as long as I can remember. It never got out but, oh, what the hell, I can tell you, she had tried suicide several times before. And I guess this last time, she was successful.”

Frankie leaned forward and put his hand gently over her hand. It did not seem forward, or inappropriate. For a moment, there was only silence. Then Carole remembered herself, gathered her wits, and sat up straight.

“But I am here to get your story, Frankie. Tell me. No doubt, the strangest story in the history of winemaking. Doctor. Tell me about Woman Wine.”

Doctor Stein leaned back in his chair, and gave her a Cheshire Cat grin.

“Alright. It all started with a pre-dawn raid. And my dear friends at the Federal Bureau of Investigation . . .

CHAPTER THREE:  
FIDELITY, BRAVERY, INTEGRITY

*"Wine is the only artwork you can drink.*

*-- Luis Fernando Olaverri.*

*"Sometimes when I reflect back on all the wine I drink, I feel shame! But then I look into the glass and think about the workers in the vineyards, and all of their hopes and dreams. If I didn't drink this wine, they might be out of work, and their dreams would be shattered. Then I say to myself, 'It is better that I drink this wine and let their dreams come true than be selfish and worry about my liver.' "*

*--Jack Handey*

Predawn. It was the kind of morning that, should something happen to wake you before the alarm, you would stop at your window, stare at the sky, and think *"What the hell, I think I'll watch the sunrise."* But most of you would not actually do that. Most of you would probably think that for a fleeting moment. But then you would pad to the bathroom, and after that, back to bed--not bothering to stop by the window for a second look. Who the hell watches a sunrise anymore? Damn few. And why not? This is what we will all

be asking ourselves, when we are on our deathbed and watching one last magnificent sunrise. For the road, so to speak.

But Charles Leslie Aun actually was the kind of man to pause and take in the sunrise. After all, he was richer than Croesus, he was retired, and he had nothing to do and nowhere to go, but to take in this glorious sunrise. And to watch the FBI drive slowly and noiselessly onto the fringe of his property, headlights extinguished. But they were not noiseless enough, nor were their cars shrouded in what was left of the lingering darkness enough, for Charles to miss their arrival.

“Holy Crap!” he yelled to nobody in particular.

He ran around, crazed and panic-stricken, for about thirty seconds, while he said a private prayer thanking God that at least his wife and kids were out of town. Then they were upon him. He heard shouting; something about a warrant, and when the battering-ram started, he could actually feel it thundering up through the oak beams. The ramming against the large massive front door shuddered through the walls into the second floor. Charles Leslie Aun could feel the beginning of the end under his feet.

A few minutes later, he was sitting handcuffed in an FBI vehicle, deep in shock. He had not seen this coming. And it is worth noting that both Frankie and his friend Steve were sitting in another FBI vehicle, watching Leslie's discomfiture from a close distance and chuckling. Steve Hill wore his official FBI jacket. Frankie did not, because he was not FBI. It was Frankie who spoke first.

“Steve, my friend, I do love coming on these ride-alongs with you.”

“Quite a step up from back in the day, when I was a DC beat cop, and the ride-alongs consisted of you watching me bust brothels and crack houses.”

“Steve, I never did understand why you chose work like that, with all the financial opportunities you had dangling in front of you?”



“Because this is what I always wanted to do, Frankie. After all, who's following whom around, in a sad attempt to inject a little adventure into their lives?”

Frankie took the comment all in good fun. They chuckled, then they both turned their attention back to Charles Leslie Aun. Frankie lit up a doobie, took a hit, and handed it to his friend.

“Steve, I can't tell you how happy this makes me. All the blood money this son-of-a-bitch has. Ha! And pretty soon he's not going to have squat.”

“Yup. He'll get time and massive fines, both. He'll be withering in jail. Good times. . . ”

“I will never forgive him for stealing my patent. And he wasn't even creative about it. All he did was bribe some guy at the patent office.”

“Well, Frankie, you won't have to worry about him anymore.”

And now, Dear Reader, you might as well know that you don't need to worry about the disposition of Charles Leslie Aun anymore either. He is no longer a part of our story. But the disposition of his property? Now that is very much a part of our story.

After a few minutes and a shared cigarette, Steve announced to Frankie that he was going in. Frankie watched it all, much amused, savoring his revenge.

Over the course of that long morning, the good men and true of the Federal Bureau of Investigation removed priceless furniture and art from room after room after room in this mansion that had been built by a famous robber baron, and had been inhabited by one robber baron or another ever since. The agents lugged out huge crates full of antique furniture, sets of china and silver, art deco lamps, and giant carved creatures from exotic points on the planet. And then, of course, there was the vast art collection: Van Gogh, Picasso,

Titian, Hockney, Cezanne, Francis Bacon (not *that* Francis Bacon, the *other* Francis Bacon), Klimt, de Kooning, Basquiat, Banksy. The list went on and on.

“What the hell’s he doing with a Kinkaid? Seriously?”

This from one of the few female FBI agents on scene, helping the others load vehicles with the priceless art.

“I understand his grandmother lived with him, up until very recently,” explained another agent.

“Ah. . .” she said, nodding largely.

Meanwhile, Steve was inside, overseeing things.

“Hey Joe. I’m breaking the tape and heading down to the basement now.”

Joe nodded, expressionless. He knew this ritual well. His boss, Steve, always had some prescient knowledge about where something coveted was hidden. . . on some floor, in some room. Crime scene tape would be carefully applied to the door leading to the room, and nobody touched it until the chief entered. And when he entered, he entered alone. And when he emerged, he always had something in his hands. And nobody ever said anything.

What the hell, these were corrupt times. In terms of volume, the chief never took much. Steve was not greedy, so much as he was particular. Hell, he probably skimmed less than most people of his rank. And he was a good egg to work for, so everybody just looked the other way. Particularly as Steve was conscientious about lining their pockets from time to time as well.

This time, it was some kind of enclosed crate that he was carrying when he left the basement. Joe had discreetly turned his back to let Steve pass through the foyer in privacy, and he never gave it a thought after that.

Steve strode through the elaborate gardens, tromping on blooms as he did. He opened his hatchback and shoved the crate in.

“What did you score?” asked Frankie eagerly.

“No, no, no!” said Steve, a triumphant smirk on his face. “Not till tomorrow night! Not till we Bonesmen meet again! It’s a surprise . . .”

And with that they drove off, leaving the underlings to finish their jobs.

CHAPTER FOUR:  
SKULL AND BONES

*“Let us have wine and women, mirth and laughter,  
Sermons and soda water the day after.” --Lord Byron*

*“We all need something to help us unwind at the end of the day. You might have a glass of wine, or a joint, or a big delicious blob of heroin to silence your silly brainbox of its witterings, but there has to be some form of punctuation, or life just seems utterly relentless.”*

*--Russell Brand, My Booky Wook*

“Spoils of war, my friends!” announced Steve, placing the case of six bottles on the table in front of the other Bonesmen. These eight gents had been meeting here in The Tombs--the beloved nickname for the meeting place of the Skull and Bones Society--since they were students at the college decades ago. They met here several times a year, and though none of them would admit it, they all got a little nervous when it was their turn to host.

“Gentlemen,” Steve continued, “This booty has been pillaged from the proprietary information pirate, that scurvy pile of parrot poop by the name of Charles Leslie Aun, and it is my offering to you tonight. Life is but a dream, we may die tomorrow, so let’s polish this off tonight! The wine is the only one amongst us who is getting any better with age, so let us waste no time!”

Laughter and applause all around.

“Ah yes, but before I forget, the names of the wines and their description, for your respective journals,” said Steve, handing around sheets of faux vintage parchment upon which was written a mind-boggling list. Oohs and aahs as his fellow Bonesman scanned the names.

“Hey Steve, how many bottles did you keep for yourself?”

“Ah, my friend, that is also proprietary information.”

More laughs, and excitement as glasses were passed around. And while they open the first bottle, you may peruse the list yourself, Dear Watcher:

Taylor Fladgate Scion Vintage Port, Portugal: \$2,930

Fritz Haag Brauneberger Juffer Sonnenuhr Riesling Trockenbeerenauslese Goldkapsel, Mosel, Germany: \$3,928

Screaming Eagle Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley, USA: 5,241

Domaine Leflaive Montrachet Grand Cru, Côte de Beaune, France: \$7,894

DRC Domaine de la Romanée-Conti Grand Cru, Cote de Nuits, France: \$15,961

Shipwrecked 1907 Heidsieck | \$275,000

Now you must remember that there were eight people in attendance that night. Eight people.

There was, of course, Frankie Stein, with the curse of a name given to him by two fabulously wealthy but alcoholic parents who were drunk for an entire week before and after his official naming.

There was Zola Adisa, an extraordinarily powerful and respected journalist, a man who had no problem pointing out that he was the only black

(& gay) one in the group, and that while he appreciated the perks of being in the secret society, he did not enjoy feeling like the token member.

There was Steve Hill, a man who had climbed to prominence in the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and who loved all the power that he wielded on a daily basis. He felt it rather made up for all the ridicule he suffered at the hands of women who couldn't help but notice his odd looks, and the strange features on his uneven face.

There was Darius Damian, bigwig Hollywood producer, who, although he had won his share of Academy Awards, also spent his time producing plays on Broadway, and thus had managed to balance his movie star-like charisma and fame, with the gravitas and respect usually reserved for New York theater types.

There was Milton Amsterdam, the man who had risen through the ranks to become the grand poobah of the Federal Reserve, and who in this day and age spent as much time fighting off allegations that he was trying to form the One World Bank, (as was his prescribed duty in the lore of the mythical Illuminati), as he did just trying to help along the economy of the United States.

There was Cole Donovan, the famous actor, whose only real pain in life came from the fact that nobody ever really appreciated how intelligent he was, blessed as he had been with a face so handsome it made Adonis look like James Woods. That was Cole's cross to bear. . .that, and the fact that he had recently announced his engagement, and was now receiving hate mail from women who felt personally betrayed. He'd had eleven stalkers around his home requiring the intercession of the police in just the last week.

There was Bill Williams, the uber philanthropist, a man who had actually dropped out of the ivy league college near the end, only to move into his mother's garage and create a computer that would, like a true modern cultural

Frankenstein, take over the world, ultimately manifesting to all its monstrous and wonderful effects on the planet. AI AI AI!

And lastly, of course, there was Michael St. Croix, a man who went from being bullied in high school, to being 4th in his class at Yale, to becoming the President of the United States of America. And yes, there was a covert contingency of Secret Service agents, both uniform and plainclothes, secreted around The Tombs that night. They observed the proceedings discreetly; they had been through this same routine several times before in the last few months and years. They were watching, in particular, that Commander in Chief of our nation, whose code name to the agents of the service was, (wait for it), “Twinkle Toes”.

So there you have it. The players in this strange night.

“This wine is absolutely perfect,” said Steve proudly. It was his night, and he knew he’d pulled off a coup d’etat.

“Well. . . I don't know if I'd say that it's *perfect*.” This from Frankie.

“Oh really? What the hell is wrong with it?” demanded Milton.

“Milton's right. What the hell is wrong with it?” asked Zola. “This bottle of wine cost half a million dollars. What, pray tell, are its flaws?”

“Yeah, Frankie. What flaws?” Bill added, genuinely curious.

“Maybe it would taste better if it cost a million bucks, instead of half a million?” suggested Michael.

“Look, I know it doesn't work like that,” explained Frankie. “Some of the oldest and most valuable bottles of wine in the world, all the experts agree, would pretty much taste like vinegar. It's just that. . .”

“--It's just that what?” barked Steve.

“It's not that this wine has flaws, it's more like--” Frankie stopped, puzzling for words.

“I know what Frankie's getting at.” said Darius. “The whole point is that ‘perfect’ is an ideal. We should never achieve it in the real world. If we did, then we would stop striving. The question is *not* whether or not this particular bottle of wine has flaws. It's that if we thought we'd created the perfect bottle of wine, or drunk the perfect bottle of wine, or whatever, we would stop striving to create a better bottle of wine. Dare I say, a *perfect* bottle of wine!”

“A man's reach should exceed his grasp, and all that?” offered Bill.

“I agree with Darius,” said Cole, who had been quiet up till now. “I mean, I thought I'd had the perfect bottle of wine before I tasted this one. So, it begs the question--”

“It begs the question how would the *perfect* bottle of wine taste?” queried Darius.

“Good question.”

“Excellent question.”

Agreement all around from the Bonesmen.

“Well, there's one thing that I know for sure, the perfect bottle of wine wouldn't taste too fruity,” said Bill. “My wife loves a fruity wine. And I just think that's practically a waste of money. Unless maybe it's for the beach or dessert or something.”

“I tell you something else it wouldn't have, it wouldn't have a screw top,” bemoaned Milton. “Poor Betsy. To this day, she cruises the wine aisle for sales, and God help me, she brings home bottles with screw tops. I say ‘Betsy, there's no point in drinking wine this cheap, we're not poor anymore.’ Poor thing, she never got over those early days of bankruptcy after we offered the IPO and it failed.”

“You know, screw tops aren't the glaring symbol of trailer trash that used to be,” added Steve. “I've read they're actually getting some traction in the wine world.”



“Can we at least agree that the perfect wine wouldn't come in a box?” asked Zola.

“Guys! We're going in the wrong direction here!,” announced Michael, who was used to herding egos. “We're all buzzed, and if we're going to try to determine what would be the perfect wine, I think making a list of features that it *wouldn't* include is kind of counterintuitive.”

“OK, but back to my question. The perfect wine, what would it taste like?” asked Darius.

For a moment, nobody said anything. Cole cleared his throat and spoke. “Okay, well, the problem I have when I try to think of what the perfect wine would taste like is I kind of do this knee-jerk thing, back to the pretentious wine descriptions of my youth, and I find myself thinking about what kind of fruits it would taste like, or flowers, or even, you know, tobacco, the kind of wood it was aged in, that kind of thing.”

Zola cackled, and everybody looked to see what he was laughing at.

“Well, it's just that there's a guy on the internet who has a whole website about pretentious descriptions, writes about wine flavored with ‘incipient notes of game bird’. ‘Blood soaked animal fur.’ ‘Crescendos into a salty tide.’ ‘Tasting of puppy fat.’ ”

There were chuckles all around, which then faded into silence as they all pondered the matter. Suddenly the challenge of finding an answer seemed terribly important to the group; you could just feel it. Finally, it was Frankie who spoke:

“I think I know what we're getting at. The perfect bottle of wine or, I should say, glass of wine--it wouldn't be about how it tasted or smelled. Although obviously that's part of it. But for me, no matter how good it smells, or how fine it tastes, to me the perfect glass of wine is always about how it makes me *feel* while I'm drinking it, after I'm finished drinking it. And though the aroma and the taste on my palate has a lot to do with it, there's something

more, this. . . ineffable thing. How the wine has made me feel for a brief and shimmering moment. It might take me back to some time when I was younger, and anything could happen in the world. Or it might launch me into the future, to when I'm old and the end is near, and I'm really okay with that, and looking forward to it. That's the power of certain glasses of wine. It might remind me of the first time I fell in love, or the first time I made love. It might remind me. . . well, I'm rambling. But I know this to be true: every great glass of wine I've had in my life, in the end, the taste and aroma don't matter as much as a *feeling*. That's what makes it great bottle of wine.”

Everybody was silent for a long moment. Frankie had nailed it, as usual. Frankie, so hyper analytical, yet so surprisingly poetic--Frankie had nailed it.

“And that is why in the history of winemaking, for thousands and thousands of years, nobody has ever talked about a really great box of wine.” said Steve, cackling at Milton’s expense.

“Enough with the box wine!” barked Milton. “You're just saying that because you know that part of my holdings is the big company vineyard that does the box wine. Say what you want, it's sending all my kids to Harvard. There's a big market for boxed wine.”

“And that fact alone explains the decline of civilization,” parried Michael.

“No, seriously, guys let's go with what Frankie said,” said Zola, actually standing up to address the group. “I think Frankie's onto something. Say what you want about woodnotes, or kissed with the memory of last year's violet crop, or smelling of oysters worn by an Ipanema woman on the beach, Frankie’s right, it's how it makes you feel.”

“I think the perfect glass of wine would make you feel powerful,” said Steve. “I mean, like a god. I'm not talking about cocaine confidence, I'm talking about the perfect bottle of wine would make you feel like an emperor of Rome. And not an emperor that came to a lousy end. One of the cool ones. . .”

“Nope. That sounds like more of a whiskey thing,” mused Zola. “There's something too mellowing about great wine for the emperor deal. Good try, though.”

“I think the perfect bottle of wine would make you feel rich!” announced Milton triumphantly. “Incredibly, powerfully, seductively rich. After all, we all know but there's a lot of fifty dollar bottles of wine that taste pretty much as good as a bottle that costs ten times that much. But it's *the fact* that you're drinking a \$500 bottle of wine--or \$50,000, for that matter--it's the fact that you can just choose to do that, that makes you enjoy having it with your kobe steak. Am I right?”

“Yeah, you are correct,” said Bill, who knew a little something about the feeling of wealth. “But Milton, I don't believe that makes a bottle of wine perfect. It just makes it prestigious. A thing to be coveted. But quite possibly far from perfect.”

“I think--”

Cole started to talk, but then he suddenly stopped himself. Everybody looked at him.

“What?” “Go on.” “Spill,” And so forth, they all said at once.

“Nothing, no, it's stupid,” muttered Cole, strangely defensive, given his movie star persona. “It's just that for twenty-odd years now you guys been calling me ‘pussy’ and ‘gay’, even though Zola here is gay and you all never gave him a hard time about that. You always respected him coming out and fighting for causes, but I'm the gay pussy for having opinions like this, that's always how it's been.”

“Opinions like what?” asked Michael.

Cole eyeballed the group. They were quiet, and listening, so Cole continued.

“Opinions like. . . I think the perfect bottle of wine would make you feel loved. Pure. Complete. Without qualification. And without end. I've had

wines that came close--if you didn't have too much or too little, but just right, if you didn't sip or guzzle, but taking it in like you take in a sunset. Like the universe is wrapping me in this big comfortable cozy blanket."

The room stumbled into silence for a few moments, contemplating this. Suddenly Darius's eyes lit up. He leaned forward, his eyes on fire.

"I've got it! I know what the perfect bottle of wine would taste like, from the moment you uncorked it, let it breathe, swirled it around, sniffed it, from the first tentative sip . . .to the very end of the bottle."

He paused for effect, making the other men groan in anticipation.

"For chrissake, Darius, spill it!" said Bill.

"The perfect bottle of wine . . . would taste like a woman."

For a moment, there is a perfectly reverent silence.

"I don't get it, Darius." Cole said finally, speaking for the rest of them.

"I mean, we all know what a woman tastes like."

"Hey hey hey!" said Michael. "We have a chivalric code in this society. This conversation is beneath us."

"Zola doesn't," Steve quipped.

"Zola doesn't what?" asked Milton.

"Know what a woman tastes like," said Steve, giggling like a kid.

"Seriously?" snapped Zola. "We're going there?"

"Guys," implored Darius, "You're not taking this seriously. You're not taking me seriously. What I meant was, when I said the perfect bottle of wine would taste like a woman, what I meant is it would taste like a woman's--"

"--A woman's soul!" said Frankie, finishing the sentence for him. Then, as though channelling his friend's thoughts, he continued: "Darius is right, the perfect bottle of wine would taste like a woman's soul. Beautiful, like a woman's soul. Delicious, potent, surprising, mysterious, and definitely multi-layered, just like a woman. With new flavors and depths revealing themselves, as you take the wine in. As you take her in. And it would leave you

with a feeling that you finally conquered it, that you had finally conquered her, that she was one with you. And you could control her at last, and love her in the way she truly deserved. And the way she made you feel--it made you feel . . . it's what you always deserved as well. It's the way you'd been waiting to feel your whole life.”

More silence. And this one went uninterrupted for a very long time. Darius and Frankie had gotten it right; this is what the perfect bottle of wine would taste like.

It would taste like a woman's soul . . .

CHAPTER FIVE:  
HADRON'S SECRET

*"If you press grapes, wine will pour out; if you crush roses, perfume will pour out; if you afflict the talented, genius will pour out."*

— *Matshona Dhliwayo*

*"The discovery of a wine is of greater moment than the discovery of a constellation. The universe is too full of stars."* — *Benjamin Franklin*

"But they didn't know what I knew. A secret I never revealed, even to my Skull and Bones soulmates. That you can contain a human soul--if you can catch it at the exact moment that it leaves the body."

Carole and Frankie were lunching in the opulent dining room. She wondered if he enjoyed a spread like this daily, or if he was just trying to impress her. But he was not focused on food, he was lost in his story.

“Which is, of course, why you’re here, isn’t it Carole? The truth about that. Well, it’s more than possible. More than theoretical. And there is no reason that you couldn’t choose a soul—within reason, of course. Consent becomes tricky, but not impossible. Even the dying need money. So there you are. After all, my dear, men have been winning women’s hearts for a hundred thousand years. How hard could it be to capture their soul?”

“Your arrogance astonishes me.”

“That’s a very pedestrian point of view, Carole. Breakthroughs in science are always heralded as arrogance. Then, by the next decade, we’re heroes. And folks just can’t get through the day without that appalling invention or discovery that got us burned at the stake a generation before.”

For a moment, she said nothing. She just stared at him.

“Go on. You were saying that they didn’t know what you knew. . . That it is possible to capture and contain a human soul.”

“Yes. And it’s not even that difficult. It’s all about building blocks. We just took what we already knew. . . ”

“I still can’t wrap my mind around that. I mean, I guess it’s true. I’ve read the science. Or you could just be the biggest snake oil salesman . . . ”

“Trust me, Carole, this is no snake oil. To scientists, whom of course you’d think would be the last people who would be on board with this whole ‘soul in a bottle thing’, it’s really just an extension of the laws of energy. You see, a hundred years ago. . . ”

“Do you mind if I record this? Because the public already knows a lot about this. It’s your point of view, your narrative, your story that I want.”

“Of course. This is a great moment in history,” said Frankie, leaning back and falling into his true element. “And it all really starts with string theory. Prior to quantum physics, all of this would have been impossible.”

“But that makes no sense. The laws of nature were always there. The physics of the universe haven’t changed.”

“Good save, Carole. You’re right, of course. Only our understanding of it has changed. And you’re just as smart as you sound on television. Sometimes one wonders if it’s just the writers.”

“I always write my own copy. So, anyway. I’m recording.”

“As I was saying. Prior to our truly understanding quantum physics, most scientists could not accept the existence of the human soul. Primarily because they couldn't prove it, they couldn't find it, they couldn't. . .”

“Capture it.”

“Precisely, Carole. However, the double-slit theory changed all of that.”

“Didn't this all start with a horrible accident?”

“Yes and no. It really started with the double-slit experiment. . .”

Carole leaned in and finished his sentence for him: “. . .*the notion that light and matter can display characteristics of both classically defined waves and particles; moreover, it displays the fundamentally probabilistic nature of quantum mechanical phenomena.*”

“Smart girl.”

“Wikipedia.”

“I should have known.”

“People are too hard on Wikipedia,” she said. “Knowledge is generally elitist. Plutocratic or even meritocratic, you might say. It doesn’t get more democratic than Wikipedia, though, where everybody can chime in. I give them a hundred bucks a year.”

“I agree wholeheartedly. I give them five thousand bucks a year.”

“Show off.”

“That word ‘notion’ you used a minute ago, though, that wasn’t Wikipedia, that was you. It would be a ‘theory of light and matter’, not a notion. ‘Notion’ is pure female. Your mythological intuition and all that crap.”

“God, you really are a misogynist.”

“I call ‘em like I see ‘em.” Got me where I am today. Got me all this.”



“All alone, with nobody to love but yourself, near as I can see.”

“Touché.”

“I just call ‘em like I see ‘em.”

“Anyway, Carole, back to science. And the soul. The theory has always been--even among the more open-minded scientists--that the soul, if it exists, is a form of energy. But what people don't realize is that the double-slit experiment is two centuries old. That's like two millennia in the world of science, so building a chamber where you can take energy and force it through the slits, and then watch that energy--usually shot from a laser--turn to both waves and particles, to do that these days is--well, to use a non-technical term, is eezy-peezy.”

“So then how does the soul enter into it?”

“That's where the unfortunate accident comes into it. You may remember that when we were shutting down the Hadron Collider last year, there was--”

“--a very ugly death, I remember, my station covered it. A scientist got locked in by accident, and got bombarded, sliced and diced, all very grisly.”

“Yes, it was very public. Good people were made to look like mad scientists.”

“Didn't something similar happen to a young scientist many years ago?”

“Yes. But not in the Hadron Collider. It was a Russian kid.”

“Bukowski, yes, I remember.”

“Actually, that's the poet. The poor scientist was Anatoli Bugorski. He worked in the Soviet U-70 synchrotron. Largest one in the world, at the time. There was a horrible mishap while he was checking out a malfunctioning piece of equipment when suddenly he got zapped with a 76 GeV proton beam.”

“Wow. That's gonna leave a mark.”

“Yes, but amazingly, not much of one. He said he saw a flash, quote, ‘brighter than a thousand suns.’ But no pain, he said. Well, they all figured he

would surely die. So they took him to a hospital, mostly to make him comfortable. His head swelled up to the size of a zeppelin, the skin on his skull began to peel off. And then, inexplicably, amazing all the doctors, he just sort of got better.”

“Really?”

“Really. Recovered, went on with his life. Even finished his PhD.”

“What was it about?”

“I dunno. Maybe what it’s like to get hit by a 76 GeV proton beam. It’s not like his committee can disagree with his analysis of what it was like.”

“And he perfectly fine now?”

“Almost. He has a constant humming in one ear. He became quite a hero to his people, the government trotted him out for special events. And, it’s the oddest thing. Because of the radiation, half of his face is frozen in time. Not a line on it, smooth as a baby’s bottom. The other side, crags and wrinkles.”

“So basically he looks like a botched botox job?”

“Yeah, I’ve met him. He looks and acts quite normal. He does have occasional seizures. And in 1996 he applied for disability based on his epilepsy and got turned down. Communism. Gotta love it.”

“But then, last year, the guy who wasn’t so lucky?” Carole asked.

“I’m getting to that. A real tragedy. But hardly the first time a ‘perfect storm’ of grim circumstances caused the unthinkable to happen--”

“Or the unsinkable to sink. The Titanic, right?”

“And the Virgin Galactic tragedy. And the Challenger shuttle explosion.”

“Were they really alive for all those moments, those poor astronauts, until they hit the water?” she said, looking suddenly sad.

“Don’t you think we should return to capturing the soul? It’s cheerier. Anyway--perfect storm. We were shutting down the Hadron Collider. The whole project. Billions of dollars lost.”

“I remember, our station covered that. The big black hole scare. Completely unfounded, of course, but it was a decision that world politicians had to make to satisfy an increasingly stupid international constituency. And please don't ever tell my viewers I called them stupid.”

“Your secret is safe with me. So. Hadron scientists were understandably outraged. Very angry. And--this next detail really shouldn't get out, so please keep it off the record--we were all having a bittersweet closing celebration, and we were drinking. And because of where we were, Switzerland, what we were drinking was schnapps. We're talking really good 100 proof. Now, you've got to figure, these guys eat, drink, and sleep Hadron Collider. You'd think they could keep themselves safe. But, as I said, it was a perfect storm. So a guy, this scientist, he's down there in the Collider. And nobody's quite sure what happened next, but the door got shut and a flip got switched--anyway, back to our perfect storm. It turns out that the superconducting magnets that keep the beam focusing on target were on the fritz, or maybe it was part of the dismantling, but anyway this poor schlub ends up with a proton beam coming his way, but darting around enough to slice the poor guy into tiny little pieces--thin like a midtown deli.”

“Dr. Stein, did you have this little story in mind when you selected carpaccio for our lunch? I think you did.”

“I swear I didn't. It's just that I really love a good carpaccio, and this is a really good carpaccio. But let me get back to it. So the monitoring equipment is still up and running, during this whole horrible accident, and it has recorded the entire event. And of course, we go back and look at it, and what do you think we find?”

Carole stared at him, speechless, her eyes wide.

“What we find, my dear is *a second set of readings*. Now the whole point of the double-slit experiment is that the photon being blasted out, it behaves like both a wave and a particle. That was the big breakthrough. The string

theory thing. But on our monitor, there's *a second* set of waves and particles. And they're acting crazy. The second wave pattern is less predictable it's. . . *alive*, for lack of a better term. And the second set of particles showing up on the monitor, they are all over the place. I mean like Tinkerbell on acid. And all of us scientists gather around, and we keep replaying it, and replaying it. Then we decide to record some more, inside the chamber. This funky set of waves and particles, they're still there. Doing their own thing. Not like anything the scientists had ever seen before. I think, personally, that we were, each of us, all of us, all thinking the same thing. We wondered if it was this poor guy's *soul*. Well. This presented us with a problem. If you are a scientist, you must follow the scientific method, so when it comes to experiments, and results, and theories, and all that, it's all about replication. Replication! You have got to replicate the experiment and come up with the same findings.

Well, Carole, you may remember, in the news some time back, a story about a guy who was one hundred and four years old? A very respected scientist. But he was a hundred and four, for Christ's sake. He had lived a good long life, and he had done some amazing things, and he was respected all over the world, but he was ancient. His body had been pretty much shot for a long time. I mean, his vitals were hanging in there, but he couldn't do very much anymore, and his body had become his prison. More than anything, he just wanted to end it. He just wanted to take his own life. But it's illegal where he lives, so he can't do it. But then somebody who works for the Hadron Collider got in touch with him, and explained the situation, and the hundred and four year old was into it, he was excited.

Like many scientists, he was on the fence as to whether or not there is such a thing as. . . a soul. But he was increasingly willing to accept the fact that there was room for the truth of a soul in string theory. It was just another form of energy, that can be neither created nor destroyed. So--and this is the first time I've talked about this publicly, Carole--we take the hundred and four year

old down into the Collider, and we make him comfortable, you know, really comfortable. We even offered to get him a couple of women, some hookers--"

"--To get zapped in the Collider along with the geezer?"

"Stop interrupting. You know what I mean. Anyway, he politely declined. But he's down there with a really good bottle of wine and they're playing "Ode to Joy", which he specifically requested. And the equipment is set up, ready to go. We all had to tell a little bit of a tall tale to our superiors, who are acquiescing to the politicians, who wanted the thing shut down. We stalled, if you will.

Anyway, we zapped the guy, and what do you think happens? The same thing. I mean, he dies, of course. But then, we all see this whole second set of waves and particles mixing in with the first set from the photon beam. And these waves and particles are just as playful with their shuck and jive, almost as though they were living things, a completely different kind of beast from the waves and particles you saw from the photon beam. And now, frankly, I think everybody who was in that facility that day believed that they had seen a human soul. For the second time. Then it was just a matter of capturing that soul in some kind of container, some kind of vessel. Genie in a bottle, if you will. I'm not going to go into the details of how that was done. If you ask any scientist, he'll tell you it's probably a fairly simple proposition, but it's also a little bit proprietary. I'm not going to tell all my secrets to a Sunday night news show. But that, my dear, is how we captured and contained a human soul."

CHAPTER SIX:  
BREATH AND THE GRAPE

*“There are hours for rest, and hours for wakefulness; nights for sobriety and nights for drunkenness—if only so that possession of the former allows us to discern the latter when we have it; for sad as it is, no human body can be happily drunk all the time.”*

—Roman Payne, *Rooftop Soliloquy*

*“Regard yourself as a small corporation of one. Take yourself off on team-building exercises (long walks). Hold a Christmas party every year at which you stand in the corner of your writing room, shouting very loudly to yourself while drinking a bottle of white wine. Then masturbate under the desk. The following day you will feel a deep and cohering sense of embarrassment.”*

—Will Self

Carole was quiet for a long time. The words finally stumbled out.

“That may be the most amazing story I have ever heard. And I have heard a lot of stories.”

Frankie threw his head back, laughing. Then he leaned forward, looking intently at her.

“But, you are no doubt wanting to hear the part where I fall madly in love with the possibility of ‘Woman Wine’? The elements were already in place, as I have explained. First, there was that bizarre night with my fellow Bonesmen. And that amazing bottle of wine--bottles of wine, I should say. That crazy discussion. And when Zola said that the perfect bottle of wine would taste like a woman--would taste as though it contained a woman's very soul-- now, mind you, nobody in the room was thinking what I was thinking. *Because nobody in the room knew what I knew.*”

Frankie poured them both more tea, beaming wickedly.

“Then came a serendipitous event that proved to be the last piece of the puzzle for me. A week after I met with the Bonesmen, I was attending a big wine symposium, at which I had agreed to speak. Ironically, the seminar is for women only. Women really are an up-and-coming force in the wine industry. And I'm only there because I'm going to give a little talk about the medicinal history of wine, just fun facts. So I'm there, waiting quietly, politely, to take my turn, and there's a woman up on the stage, giving her presentation. And oh, poor thing, was she bo-o-o-ring. . . .”

Suddenly, we, the Watchers, we are no longer in the castle. We are in a Hilton presentation room, crammed full of ambitious women, eager for their enological education to begin--or continue.

And Dr. Frankie Stein was there, doing what he did best, when he was not actually in his lab. He was picking up women, at a place where bright, sexy, charismatic women abounded. He had worked fast. He and his latest conquest kissed passionately backstage, as the woman giving her presentation onstage droned on, dangerously dull:

*“Wine micro-oxygenation, as many of you know--but just to go over it again--is the controlled addition of oxygen during the winemaking process.”*

The woman put her glasses on, and read from her notes, as behind her, the powerpoint presentation offered an additional level of tedium:

*“As you can see, the wine consumes the oxygen through a preferred chemical reaction. The micro-oxygenation process allows mass transfer from the gaseous to the dissolved state, as long as rates of addition are lower than the capacity of the wine to consume the oxygen. Again, the development of micro-oxygenation works by addition of oxygen into wine at a controlled rate. This process stabilizes color, and improves both the astringency and aromatic components of the final wine. . .”*

Frankie always made sure to tell event planners that he needed complete privacy backstage, to gather his thoughts and prepare his remarks. And since getting him to speak was always regarded as such a coup, obedience was guaranteed. That was why he was not shy about grabbing the woman that he had hit on earlier, and, even as the other woman spoke onstage, he groped his conquest behind the curtains. She giggled as he hoisted her onto a table and pulled her skirt up to her panties. She moaned in lusty delight. Meanwhile, nearby, the dull woman droned on:

*“One challenge with this oxygenation technique is that each grape variety behaves differently when exposed to micro-oxygenation, thereby making it difficult to know exactly how much oxygen, and how quickly the oxygen should be injected into the wine. There are dual systems for the controlled addition of oxygen into wine: First, bubble plume diffusion. This methodology utilizes a ceramic diffuser through which oxygen is periodically injected into the wine tank as a stream of very fine bubbles, creating a bubble plume, please see Figure One. Secondly, permeable membrane diffusion. A semipermeable tubular membrane is pressurized and permeates oxygen across the membrane and into the wine--”*



Meanwhile, backstage, things were getting hot and heavy. The woman grabbed Frankie's face, kissed him hard, and looked at him.

"If I was a bottle of wine, what would I be?"

"Pardon?"

"You heard me. What kind of wine would I be if I was wine, instead of a woman?"

"Why are you--I don't--"

"It gets me off, you know, when a guy has a great answer."

He looked at her. She was a blonde, a natural one, he would guess, with a Nordic vibe. And he remembered that her last name--although he could not remember it exactly at this moment--had confirmed that.

"Uh... I see you as ... Schlatter Spätburgunder 2014."

"Oooh, I love that you see me that way. Isn't that by Martin Waßmer?"

"Don't forget his brother Fritz. From Bad Krozingen, Germany. Are you wet? Are you a Bad, Bad little Krozingen?"

"Oh God, I'm so turned on!"

The droner continued, unaware of what was happening just a few feet away:

*"If you'll take a look at the powerpoint, you can see that wines were tested before and after micro-oxygenation treatment for standard enological parameters including alcohol content, turbidity, pH, volatile acidity, sulfur dioxide, color intensity, hue, degrees of red pigments, SO<sub>2</sub>-resistant pigments, total red pigments, and total polyphenols. Oh, and all analyses were done in triplicate. In summary, micro-oxygenation allows us to. . ."*

Suddenly, just as he was ready to climax, Frankie, who had been paying half-attention to the woman blathering on at the podium just yards away, pulled out from his lover of the hour.

“That’s it!” he cried effusively.

“No it isn’t!” said his conquest desperately, “I was so close, I was just about to. . . ”

“No, no, don’t you see?” exclaimed Frankie, in his best eureka voice. “How to achieve the perfect bottle of Woman Wine! Oxygenation!”

He zipped up his pants. And he was gone.

\*\*\*\*\*

It seemed too good to be true. Harvest Moon Vineyard, which rolled over the countryside just a half-hour drive from Shadowstone Castle, went on the market right at the same time that Frankie decided to buy himself a vineyard. He had always liked the looks of it when he was a child, back in the days when his father would take the long, lazy country road to Shadowstone--his mother hated the interstate. It seemed peaceful and industrious, always full of laughing, sweating, proud people, out in the sun and happy for it.

Frankie studied the quotation above the entrance to the vineyard:

*“Wine is earth’s answer to the sun.” --Margaret Fuller*

“I like that,” he said, to the woman who owned the land. She was pretty and confident, a country woman, probably about sixty--or fifty, with decades of the sun taking its toll on her face. But she was slim and strong, with long, thick, tumbling silver hair. And when she smiled, her whole being lit up. She obviously loved what she did.

“I picked that quotation out myself. And by Margaret Fuller, no less. A woman. A feisty woman. We lost her too soon.”

“What an odd coincidence,” said Frankie, genuinely enjoying himself already, “I was just reading a book of wine quotations last night.”

“How appropriate. You know, I’ll make no secret of it, I wasn’t going to sell to someone I don’t like. But I so enjoyed our conversation on the phone. And of course, I admire your work. I always wanted to go into the sciences, as a young girl. But then, you know, life happened. Although, truth to tell, the business of growing wine is probably ninety percent good, solid science.”

Frankie chuckled. “What is the other ten percent?”

“Luck. And love. Equal parts.”

“Well, I like that, too.”

She beamed. “Are you ready for the grand tour?”

The particulars of the tour are not important for the purposes of our story. Frankie, being Frankie, had studied the matter assiduously over the course of a few days, and there were only two things he cared about: grapes ready for harvest, and a mix of oak barrels with stainless steel vats. If Frankie was going to produce the most astonishing wine ever to touch the lips of man, he wanted the freedom to experiment with the two methods. The owner’s deceased husband, just before his death, had even purchased a couple of the new cement egg vats. Frankie hadn’t expected that. And there were grapes—gorgeous grapes from God, just ready for the turning. Frankie was thrilled about that. This was a private matter and it would be a protected vineyard, with security very tight and high; he didn’t want to order grapes from another vineyard and have other people all up in his business.

An hour after the tour had started, they were back at the entrance, standing just as they had when he first arrived. Frankie breathed deeply, taking it all in, as though it was already his. He smiled at the pretty owner.

“I like it. I like it very much. Scratch that. I love it!”

“Look, Doctor Stein--”

“--please, call me Francis.”

“Well then, Francis, I just have to tell you, full disclosure, this is not a profitable vineyard. I know I shouldn't be saying that to you, you being a potential buyer--who doesn't even want to haggle about the price--but something about you just makes me want to be honest. Anyway, my dear husband Harvey, God rest his soul, he planted too many varieties of grapes for this vineyard to be efficient. We argued about that more than anything else.”

Her voice trailed off, and she looked like she might cry.

“And now, what I wouldn't give to get into one last argument with him. Anyway, he wanted all these varieties, and the truth is they just take way too much maintenance. Each patch of land requires slightly different care, water, nutrients, that kind of thing. It's very time consuming and labor intensive. And as we discussed, Harvey just wouldn't let go of the old oak barrels. I told him that if we were going to make a profit at this, we should switch completely over to stainless steel. But he loved the old ways, so he went fifty-fifty, half barrels, half vats, and our profits--or lack thereof--reflected that.”

“And everything you just said, my dear, is precisely why I want this vineyard. I especially love the old massive wine press. What a delightful relic! And I'll make sure that you are generously compensated, I promise. I'd like to take possession as soon as possible. Is there anything else we need to discuss?”

Frankie extended his hand to shake hers, and she returned in kind.

“Frankie--Francis--I suppose I could tell you that I'm desperately sad, and of course I am. But guess what, I am retiring to another vineyard in

France! My son's business. So how depressed do I get to be about that? Hey, can I give you a hug?"

She embraced him without waiting for his reply. When she pulled away, he smiled into her eyes and said, "In honor of your husband, Harvey, I will leave the quotation up there on the sign, and add this one to it: '*Wine is sunlight held together by water.*' Galileo. You like?"

"Oh, I've never heard that one--by Galileo, no less. I just love it!"

And Frankie saw that they were tears glistening in her eyes.

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Carole was staring at Frankie, not thinking to hide her expression of dumbstruck awe.

"So just like that, Frankie? You fuse the Hadron Collider experience with an oxygenation lecture, and bammo, epiphany! Woman Wine! All you needed was a vineyard, so you bought one. Problem solved."

He grinned broadly, basking in her admiration.

"To me, the most amazing part is how simple it is, Carole, when you get down to it. You see, ever since the 'dual' or 'double-slit' theory--tomAto, TomAHto, you know--and ever since most scientists, except for those braindead holdouts at Liberty University, Falwell's playground, embraced the whole notion of string theory, the scientific community finally accepted the fact that energy could be both a wave and a particle. Quite simply, it could behave like both of those things, that's what the double-slit theory proves. Then, of course, the next step was to make the machines that track the phenomenon more portable. Not much more complicated than a machine you might see in the emergency room in any hospital. Think about it, Carole! You

have this soul, a human being's soul, for God's sake, encased in a large tank along with oxygen! Again, not that different than something a scuba diver would take with him. Except this one contains a human soul. So, using what is by now a very time-honored and manageable technique of infusing oxygen into a vat of fermenting wine, well, you just substitute the pure oxygen for the oxygen containing a woman's soul, and before you know it, changes are taking place in that wine. Now, when you inject oxygen into a tank of wine, the reactions are, of course, *going on at a molecular level*. And all that needs to happen next is that the photons of energy which constitute the human soul bombard the oxygen molecules that are going into the vat, and bammo, you have every molecule of that wine changed via infusion of soul-photon bombarded oxygen molecules.”

Frankie suddenly stopped talking. There was a silence, and Carole realized that he was finished. That really was all there was to it. She assumed it was more complicated than that . . . and maybe there were obvious practical reasons that he wasn't divulging more. But clearly, Frankie knew what he was talking about. The whole world had long known that he was a brilliant scientist.

And now the world would know that he held the secret to capturing a woman's soul.

CHAPTER SEVEN:  
GATHERING GRAPES

*“I can hold my alcohol, just like I’m a wine bottle. I dance as fluid as glass, and my heart shatters just as easily.” — Jarod Kintz*

*“Mocking a woman is like drinking too much wine. It may be fun for a short time, but the hangover is hell.” — Brandon Sanderson*

Carole had never interviewed anyone like Frankie. He seemed open, forthright--and yet he also seemed to be hiding vast troves of secrets. He was an iceberg.

“Look, Frankie, we both know that most of your story is available all over the web. It's those missing details that fascinate me. And would fascinate my viewers. So here's the part I don't understand. Once you realized that you could literally capture a human soul, and then figured out how to oxygenate that soul into wine, why on Earth did you try to get female candidates by advertising that you wanted to capture their souls at the moment of death and

inject it into wine? No judgment here, but that just kind of sounds creepy. Why didn't you simply say that you were looking for people to donate their bodies to science and that you would pay handsomely?"

"Carole, you are smarter than that. Because that would be quite illegal. It isn't legal for a person to sell their body parts, no matter what the cause, so it's also illegal for me to buy bodies. Oh, there are body brokers who can find ways around the law, but that's something I want no part of. Those kinds of people spend far too much time interacting with the police and spending money on lawyers. Besides, it would ruin my reputation."

Incredulous, Carole shot back.

"But taking a woman's soul and infusing it into a bottle of wine won't?"

Frankie grew livid. He did not raise his voice, but his eyes burned.

"Miss Campbell, if you wish this interview to continue, I suggest you not mock my reputation or the prospects for my legacy. I always go out of my way to do the ethical thing. Besides, developing the technology to capture a human soul will make me immortal in all kinds of ways. I'll be viewed as a god. I've only just started."

There was a long silence.

"I'm sorry, doctor. That was incredibly rude of me. Unprofessional."

"Alright. Just so long as we understand each other. And I'm sorry that I lost my temper, Carole. We've come a long way. I was starting to think of us as friends, and I don't want to lose ground."

"It's fine, Frankie."

"Anyway. There are all kinds of problems with me announcing that I would compensate people with money if they would willingly turn their body over to me at the moment of their death. But, *and this is the fascinating part*, there are no laws on the books about the disposition of the soul. The word 'soul' never comes up in any legal code ever, anywhere. Oh, it will. But there's nothing illegal about me gathering the air surrounding a dying or dead body.



So, rather than cloak it in some kind of traditional lingo about selling one's body to science, I did a new thing. I said exactly, honestly, what I was going to do.”

“But secretly?”

“Yes. Because I didn't ‘advertise it’, to borrow a phrase you used earlier. I would never have used such a blunt or public tool. I did it secretly, and I'll tell you why. Because if I was to make some kind of public announcement, I would have been so swamped by the press and official entities, to say nothing of all the weirdos, that I would not have been able to get my work done. Make no mistake, I knew full well that this would go public eventually. I knew what would rain down on me. And I was ready for that; it goes with the territory. It's been fine. You're the lucky one who gets my story from me, personally. But yes, in the beginning, I did it privately. I studied forums, all kinds of chat rooms, and I chose to p.m. carefully chosen individuals. I followed melancholy threads in which people who were about to die talked about their thoughts and feelings. That's where I got my candidates.”

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The scene: Frankie's opulent library. None of the women whom you are about to meet, Dear Reader, really seemed to fit in the library; they were more like creatures you would find in a church basement or a seedy bar, or perhaps a tattoo parlor. But since Frankie could not imagine relocating himself to any of these places in order to secure the interviews, here these women were. In his precious library. There was nothing to do but weather it, he told himself.

The perky female smiled at Frankie. It was an unnerving smile, he thought to himself. They all had unnerving smiles. She bubbled and blabbed her way through the hour, hardly letting him talk:

“I just want to say that everything I do, every day, is for the greater glory of God. Don't get me wrong. It isn't easy, breathing every breath for the greater glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. But the rewards are, well. . . I guess I'm going to see exactly what those rewards are, and very soon. That is, if you choose me. When someone like me hears that this brilliant scientist, meaning you, of course, has a plan to take a soul and infuse it into wine, it is impossible not to think about how Christ turned water into wine at the marriage at Cana. John Chapter 2, Verses 1-11. It is impossible not to think about the Last Supper, and how Jesus said ‘Drink this in remembrance of me.’ Mark 14:22-25, Luke 22:18-20, 1 Corinthians 11:23-25. Etcetera Etcetera. Praise Be To God. Don't get me wrong. I'm not comparing myself to Christ. How much I walk and live in His image, that's for God to decide, to compare me to Christ. But anyway, the idea of my soul becoming wine. It does seem so Christ-like. I thought about running this whole idea past the fellowship in my church. But they can be so judgmental. I mean, the last time I tried to share an idea that I had with them. . . Oh, like *they're* such experts in mental health. Like they're all trained psychiatrists. If anybody should have the Baker Act invoked against them, it's some of those biddies who run that congregation. But. Anyway. I wanted to ask you. What I'd really like--that is, I do want to go through with this thing, having you take my soul and infuse it into a big beautiful vat of wine, but rather than money, I was wondering if you could send the bottles of wine to a list of churches that I brought with me today? Starting with St. Patrick's Cathedral. That's really important to me. In fact, that's kind of a deal-breaker. I don't think that's too much to ask, do you? In return for my immortal soul, you send the bottles of my soul wine to the churches of my choice?”

Frankie nodded slowly. “Uh-huh,” he said, continuing to give the practiced appearance of listening.

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And on to our next candidate.

“Well, when I got the diagnosis oh, I remember my reaction was ‘well of course’. Of course, I got a deadly disease that’s going to take my life. Something crappy always happens to me, and this is just the next crappy crappiest thing. You know, my life used to be pretty fucking rosy. I was married to a wonderful man. Rich man. At least I thought he was wonderful. He was rich. But it wasn't wonderful. I guess it was if you consider a fag marrying a naive young girl wonderful. And when he finally comes out of the closet, you know, he tries to be so gracious. Saying he'll give me this big fat alimony, plus I can have the house and everything in it. But I have been publicly humiliated. I mean, my name meant nothing anymore. I couldn't go anywhere, I couldn't do anything. All my club memberships, suddenly meaningless. Charity work lost its meaning. So you know what I did? I sued his partner for alienation of affection. And in one of the few instances in my life where luck has not gone against me, it just so happened I lived in one of the few remaining states where you can do that, sue for alienation of affection. And it went all public and he was humiliated. Both of them were humiliated. God, I have to tell you it felt good. It felt really good. But then the blood-sucking lawyers took all my money. Now I live in this shithole neighborhood. I used to live on the big island in Hawaii. I had a house right on the beach. God, it was beautiful. Life on the island is a hell of a lot more boring than you imagine it’s going to be, though. It's kind of funny, my husband used

to sit on the balcony with his binoculars, and I assumed he was looking at all the women in bikinis. Now I find out he was looking at all the men in their Speedos. What a prick rat bastard he was. But hey, I'm just nattering on, let's talk about turning my soul into wine.”

Frankie nodded slowly. “Uh. Yes. Let’s.”

“Oh God. Look, I know I don't present well. My wardrobe has seen better days. I haven't been to my hair salon gal, oh she's a genius, but I haven't seen her in a while. She's on vacation. Do you have any cigarettes? No, never mind. I've quit. Anyway, my point is, I may be a little off my game these days, but I used to be somebody. I did, I used to be an artist, and a teacher, and a crystal specialist. Oh, and also I play the tuba. . . how about something to drink? ”

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And right on to the next:

“I mean, you're a doctor, so I can share this with you, right? Do you know how many times I have orgasmed just thinking about the fact that you are going to turn my soul into wine? And that men will drink that wine, and that it will go through their body, every part of their body, into their brain, making them drunk, making them laugh and lust and love, maybe even cry. Then, they'll just piss it out back into the planet, I mean even if it goes into the toilet, it all ends up back a part of the earth, right? Oh, you know I just always pictured a man drinking the wine. But if a woman drinks it, that would be okay too. In fact, that would be really erotic. I just thought of that. Wow.”

Frankie stared at her, a smile frozen on his face. She blathered on.

“Do you know what vorarephilia is? According to an abstract on the government’s own NCBI website--do you know what the NCBI is? National Center for Biotechnology Information. Anyway, it defines vorarephilia as ‘an infrequently presenting paraphilia, characterized by the erotic desire to consume or be consumed by another person or creature.’ Do you know that there used to be this whole elaborate website just dedicated to cannibals meeting people who wanted to be eaten? That's weird, isn't it? They took that site down, but now that stuff is all over the Dark Web. Don't get me wrong. I never posted on that site. Well, okay, I posted, but it was really in the name of, you know, research. For a book of haikus that I was writing. But the thing is, I've read all of this scientific type stuff, and it's like people still don't understand why people do it. Sure, they have an idea that there's perverse sexual gratification involved, but like why, *why* do people get sexual gratification out of it? Particularly the ‘being eaten’ part. Like, I grasp the power trip of killing and cooking and consuming another human being, and that may be gratifying. Dominance. But wanting to *be* the meal? That's a long way from ‘Fifty Shades of Grey’ submissive. Closest I can figure is that these people had agonizingly difficult times being intimate in their lives, so they figure that in death, what could be more intimate than becoming one with another person, literally? Being inside his body. Don't get me wrong, I don't find that erotic. I'm not getting aroused right now. I'm not. Did you think that I was becoming aroused? I just find it, you know, academically interesting. Do you want to hear some of my haikus now?”

Frankie’s smile belied the level of hell to which his soul had descended. But it was a process, he told himself. And he would just have to find a way to survive it. It would all be worth it, in the end. When he had his wine.

He finally replied, quoting Hannibal Lecter: “Okey-Dokey.”

CHAPTER EIGHT:  
ARIEL'S LAMENT

*"Wines are like women in that it's often the imperfections that fascinate."*

*—Sam Neil*

*"Wine had to be grapes first. Diamonds had to be rocks first. Butterflies had to be caterpillars first. Rainbows had to be storms first."*

*—Matshona Dhliwayo*

Frankie studied her. She looked like what they used to call a "hippie", back in the day. But that was a long time ago, and hippies were no more. Hippies were, for lack of a better word, extinct.

But there were these earth mother types, that is what he had heard them called, he was sure of it. Girls, women, with long hair, limpid eyes, lithe bodies, and ageless faces. He liked her before she even spoke a word, and although he knew it was wrong to prejudge, he knew that he had found his

soul. The soul he had been looking for. And her name, poetically enough, was Ariel.

She took a bite of cake, a sip of tea, and started talking.

“Well. This is all kind of awkward, isn't it? But not in a bad way. Oh, about me? Okay, I am twenty-three years old. And you'd think that I'd be freaked out or hysterical or something. Because for most people, you know, only twenty-three years old, that seems far too young to die. To know that you're going to die soon. But for me, I guess you could say it's too old to die. Because guess what, I was not supposed to live even until my first birthday. What's wrong with me has a long, complicated medical name, which I can tell you later, and it's very rare, and it's pretty much untreatable. At least, it's not treatable in the sense that I'm going to be able to live a long life. They told my parents that I wouldn't live for more than a few months. Then, on my first birthday, they told me I'd be lucky to live to the age of five. Then it was ten, and then a few more years, and a few more years, and, well, you get the gist of it.

But now, oh well, it seems that the jig is up. Really. I mean, I've seen the science. I've seen the test results and the x-rays. And my parents and I, we've talked to every doctor on the planet who could have possibly have made a difference. And I've got maybe a month. But I have to tell you, I'm strangely okay with it. Well, I'm not okay with it, of course, part of me is bitter. Has always been bitter. And part of me is scared.

But when you live with the thought of dying for two decades, well, gee, after a while, it just gets old. And you accept it. And you make what you can of the time you have. And I had a weirdly good run. You would be amazed, especially with the internet, how much people are willing to do for you, and how much good shit--oh, excuse me--I guess I should say “bling” they're willing to give you when they know you're going to die. Toys and trips, and cash for medical expenses, so my parents don't have to lose their house in

addition to losing me. I've traveled the world, and I've gotten about ten thousand great gifts from friends and strangers. I've been able to do a lot of things. I guess you could say that I've done more in twenty-three years than most people do in their lifetime. So, that's the story about me and the Grim Reaper.

Now, as far as your project goes. I'm comfortable with it. No. Wait. That's an understatement. I'm not just comfortable with it, I'm really up for it, wildly enthusiastic about it. See, it's like this. When you spend the first two decades of your life going to doctors and hooked up to machines and getting horrible prognoses--prognoses?--whatever, anyway, it all just seems so damned unfair. Just like it seems unfair to the thousands of little kids with cancer, so anyway, you grow up pretty skeptical of organized religion. Ritual prayer and all that crap. I cannot tell you how many men of the cloth have tried to get me to 'Praise Jesus'. Do I hear a hallelujah? But I've listened to them and I've read the Bible like they practically ordered me too, and I don't think my dying makes any sense. It's not merciful or just. And then when I studied history, and a so-called merciful God, you know, how do you explain all those dead Jews, and people born to abject poverty, and how do you explain all the babies stricken with horrible diseases?

You get what I'm saying, right? I just cannot look at the world as it is, and the history of the world as it's always been, and believe that a traditional, religious kind of God is behind it all. Now, that said, it doesn't mean that I don't believe in some kind of Higher Intelligence. I don't want to call myself a Wiccan, but let's just say that my view of whatever Higher Intelligence is out there does not conform with organized religion. For a long time, I had a boyfriend. If you are wondering what happened, we didn't break up. He died. That's how we met, he had the same disease. . . well, anyway, I'm rambling, but what I'm saying is, I remember one of the things that Danny said right before he died was that maybe God is in the numbers? We were talking about Einstein



and Hawking, and physics and string theory and all that crazy stuff, and Danny said he believed that there was some Higher Intelligence out there too, but not the God of the churches. . . but maybe well, like I said that he said, maybe God is in the numbers. Do I sound crazy if I tell you that I believe in reincarnation? That the soul is strong and powerful, and eternal? And I believe that the soul can outlive the body and find another place to live? I could tell you about some of the experiences I've had, some of the dreams and flashbacks and regressions, that convinced me that I am an old soul.

But I don't want you to think that I'm too weird or peculiar to take on as a candidate for your project. Suffice it to say that I've searched my soul--haha--anyway, I thought about it a lot, and I've got to tell you, I think you're onto something. If you capture my soul and infuse it into this grand vat of wine, and make a few hundred bottles and it's distributed here and there and then imbibed by all of these different people, all of these other human souls. . . well, I don't think that that will diminish my soul, or even split it into separate parts. I cannot rationally explain why I believe this, but I think if I become part of another human soul. . . or souls. . . I will somehow become logarithmically more. So much more. Who knows? Maybe if somebody who is not such a good person 'imbibes me', then I'll make them a better person. Because now I'm a part of them. And vice versa: who knows how it would elevate my soul, and my future karmic prospects, if the person who 'drank me' was somehow wonderful and creative and kind? Am I making any sense to you at all?"

Frankie stared at her, rapt. She was wonderful. She was bright and precocious, bubbly and effervescent, and yes, ironically, full of life. Indeed, for someone who was about to die, he thought, she was so full of life that even the words he came up with to describe her in his mind sounded like a description of a bottle that you might read about in Wine Spectator Magazine. She was perfect.

But none of this could be seen on Frankie's features.

His mind and heart racing, like champion Olympians vying for the gold, Frankie harnessed them inside and maintained his poker face. He kept his calm and unreadable demeanor. He just nodded largely as she continued:

"I suppose one thing that's influenced my thinking is that for a few years now, I worked at that hospital for kids with cancer. I guess I just felt that because I knew I was dying, I could understand these kids in a way that nobody else really could, not even their parents. And I could give them a perspective that nobody else could. And that maybe, just maybe, they might help me get through everything I was going through. Oh, if people could only see these kids, they are so brave. They are so noble, and beautiful."

Frankie did not think it was possible to be any more infatuated with this candidate for his mad scientist project, which he even called it in his own brain. Her talking was like music to him.

"Oh, the children's hospital thing reminds me. I do want the cash that you're paying. I'm very serious about that. And I want it divided three ways. I want one-third of it to go to my grandmother and her nursing home. I've gotten really close to a lot of the seniors there, and the staff too, they're all really great. And another third I want to go to the children's hospital, that should be obvious. And then, of course, the last third, there's this animal rescue group I work with because we train these animals to be comfort dogs for the children's hospital and the senior home and so forth. And I want them to have the last third of the money. So are we good?"

Frankie did consciously try to hide how dumbfounded and smitten he was with her at that moment. If he was honest with himself, he would admit that he had fallen in love with her, from the moment she had started speaking. What a damn shame it was, he thought to himself, that she even had to die. That she *ever* had to die. But she was leaving this earth, and even Dr. Frankie Stein, with his multiple degrees, couldn't do a damn thing about it. What he

could do was immortalize her. He could transform her into a perfect bottle of wine. He could turn her soul into the nectar of the gods. And of course, honor her request about the charities.

The game was afoot.

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Now, many things would happen in Frankie's life, in the days and weeks that followed his first meeting with this beautiful, otherworldly girl. Or perhaps we should say, young woman. Or perhaps we should say "soul."

But in the grand context of this story, those things that happened to Frankie, and those sundry tasks he performed to pass the time, they really did have no meaning at all. In fact, Frankie would tell you that nothing in his life had any meaning, except for this: he was waiting for her to die. Whenever he admitted that to himself, it always sounded ghoulish to him. But that was exactly what he was doing, he was waiting for her to die.

They had come to an arrangement. She would stay at her own apartment and monitor herself as she always had. The day nurses would come, as usual. And she would know when it was close to the end. She would just know. There were any number of ways to know, some medical, some mystical. The only thing she had to do that was a little devious--and she felt horrible about this--was that she would have to make sure that her parents were not around, once the final hours were upon her.

Frankie recalled her waxing on about this, during one of her last visits to Shadowstone Castle. They were both standing by her car, trying to ignore the specter of the Grim Reaper that seemed to be literally hovering above them.

“The thing about wanting my parents far away, when it happens. . . I feel bad about that,” she explained to Frankie. “But, not as bad as you might think. And here's why. For one thing, I think I know my parents pretty damn well after twenty plus years of nearly dying. And I really believe that it would be easier for them if they just got the news from somebody. Of course, I know they wouldn't agree with that. But they love me so much, they've always been so loving, and I think that watching me die, it might just be too much for them. I know this is going to sound crazy, but I think that knowing that I was going to die young has been harder on them than it has been on me.

And the other thing is--and I guess this is maybe a really selfish thing to say--but every time we get into this whole dying mode, my mom just sobs, and she's got the loudest, most bellicose and melodramatic way of sobbing, with the shrieks and the shaking shoulders and, well, damn it, I just want it to be peaceful. As peaceful as it can be, all things considered. And my dad, he just shakes his fists to the heavens and yells at God, then flails and beats his chest--don't get me wrong, they're not Italian or anything. It's just that this is how they've always been. But dammit, it's my life! More importantly, it's my death. And I think that it should be on my terms.

I can create a peaceful room. The right music, you know, and my cats will be there--I've taken care of what's going to happen to my cats after I die, so you don't have to worry about that. I even know the foods I want to eat on the last day. And the kind of incense I want to burn. I can burn incense right, that won't impact the experiment? Anyway, I just don't want my parents to have to go through this at the actual moment. So that means you and I will be there alone. Just you, and me, and this amazing equipment you have that can capture and preserve my soul. And after that, I guess I just go on to the next level. Because I do believe that there is a next level. And I don't feel that bad about not wanting my parents there. Although I have to admit, I kind of feel bad that I don't feel bad. Does that make any sense? Or do I just sound crazy?”

“You sound as if you are an angel on earth, my dear. And I think you are going to make an amazing vintage.”

Frankie was studying her, fascinated and a little flushed. They talked for a few more minutes. Then, just like that, she excused herself, got in her car, and drove away.

And so, for the next few weeks, Frankie did nothing--nothing that mattered, except to wait for the call. They spoke daily, but it was always perfunctory. Just a strange kind of checking in, as he waited for the final call.

The clarion call.

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Finally, it came. It was just as she had said. When he arrived at her home, he was carting along with him his magnificent, mystical machine, with its switches and buttons, and most importantly, its large black screen, so he could monitor her soul as it left her body and entered the chamber--just as he had watched the same drama so many months ago, in the Hadron Collider.

Ariel was strangely ebullient. She had dirty dishes in her kitchen sink, joking about how now, the mess would be somebody else's to clean. She had feasted on gourmet sausages and deep-fried, thick-cut french toast for breakfast. With a side of hash browns, no less, and a bowl of strawberries, with fresh whipped cream. Frankie met her cats, and she gave Frankie a note that he was to give to a friend of hers who would come by to pick up the cats and take them to their new home, once she had died. Even the incense she had picked out--incense being something that Frankie usually loathed--was beautiful. The music was some Celtic tribe called “Anuna.”

Perhaps it was because she knew her own body so well, or perhaps it was because Frankie was here now and she didn't have to wait any longer, but she

was fading fast. She told him that she didn't have much time left, not much time at all. And he believed her. He could see it in her eyes. And then out of nowhere, she began singing little songs. Not to him, not even to herself, just out there to no one in particular. She was singing to the universe:

*“Hush little baby, don't say a word, Papa's going to buy you a mockingbird. And if that mockingbird don't sing, Papa's going to buy you a diamond ring.”*

*“You are my Sunshine, my only Sunshine, you make me happy when skies are gray. You'll never know dear, how much I love you, please don't take my Sunshine away.”*

*“Singing bye bye Miss American Pie, drove my Chevy to the levy and the levy was dry. And good ole boys were drinking whiskey and rye, singing this will be the day that I die. . . This will be the day that I die. . .”*

*Baby, look at me, and tell me what you see. . . I can catch the moon in my hand. Don't you know who I am? Remember my name, Fame. I'm gonna live forever. I'm gonna learn how to fly, high, I feel it comin' together. People will see me and cry, Fame, I'm gonna make it to heaven! Light up the sky like a flame, fame, I'm gonna live forever, Baby, remember my name, Remember. . .”*

And she was gone. Frankie had been sitting next to her deathbed the entire time, of course, discreetly watching his equipment out of the corner of his eye. He waited until she had breathed her last, then he methodically, deliberately flipped switches and pressed buttons. It is not worth going into detail here about how he had already tested this several times on dogs, cats, a wild deer. Even a bird. You get the idea. Suffice it to say that Frankie knew this was going to work. (The confirmed fact that creatures have souls is a whole 'nother book, and we have neither time nor room to tell that story here.)

The Double Slit theory was not in play here; there was no bombardment by photon rays. It was just Frankie and this beyond state-of-the-art, futuristic

machine watching her soul ascend from her body. In fact, the last mortal thought to pass through Ariel's mind was that the machine looked like the one on top of the Ghostbuster's car--minus the car.

But before it entered the chamber, and just after it left her body, it allowed Frankie to experience an amazing and miraculous moment. The soul was a rainbow of colors, but not like any rainbow he had ever seen on this planet. It was cavorting and playful, yet it had about it a symphonic elegance, a purpose, and a symmetry, even as it was wild and asymmetrical.

Frankie stared, awestruck. He had not known that anything could be so beautiful. This was not like the soul of the 104 year old dying man who wanted his life to end, nor like the scientist who had died in that horrific accident, filled with terror and agony. This was an entirely different matter. The smell of flowers became so overpowering, Frankie thought that he would faint. For a moment, it seemed as though the soul was trying to interact with him--but then, it seemed to be totally oblivious of him, waltzing and whirling in its own fanciful realm, hovering as it did between life and death.

Then it was gone.

Into the chamber.

## TEA & CAKES IN WONDERLAND

"And just like that, she was gone," said Frankie, not making eye contact with Carole, but staring off into the sky, as though searching for something.

The two of them were having high tea on the patio.

"But you had her soul?" asked Carole, eating the last of her strawberries, taking in the view. The tea had been divine. (The first meal, Frankie had explained, was brunch. This was more of an early high tea.) The gardens all

around her were glorious. Butterflies cavorted in the Buddleia and Lantana; hummingbirds darted about their feeders full of nectar. It was a nearly perfect moment.

“Well, I know this will sound disingenuous,” said Frankly, smiling sadly, “But I think she had captured a part of my soul as well. What an amazing creature. Carole, let’s walk. I’ll show you more of the house and grounds.”

She nodded in assent, and they strolled together, further and deeper into the rear grounds of the estate.

“What happened next?” asked Carole.

“Come on. I’ll show you the topiary. They’re famous, and you’ve probably seen them in magazines. But it’s just not the same as seeing them in person. So, what happened next was, believe it or not, a fairly elementary process of oxygenating the wine. Very established, almost routine--”

“--only this oxygen contained a human soul.”

“That is correct. Here we are.”

They came around the corner of a tall hedgerow, and Carole looked up. She started to laugh. To her astonishment, she was staring at a topiary version of Alice. That Alice. The Wonderland kid. And nearby, the Mad Hatter.

“All of these are wonderful. Really spectacular.”

“I knew you’d love them. Come with me. All the characters are here.”

“Fine, but don’t change the subject. The oxygenation. Then, after that?”

“Well, after that, I waited.”

She nodded, and they walked in silence past the White Hare, the Cheshire Cat, Tweedledum and Tweedledee, the Caterpillar, and of course, the Red Queen--red from a riot of begonias planted into the boxwood.



“It takes months for even an abbreviated batch of wine to be ready. And I certainly felt that I owed it to her to do better than some speedy vintage. So, as I said, I waited.”

Now they were standing in front of a spectacular fountain. Neptune was towering triumphantly in the middle, surrounded by mermaids and a myriad of strange sea creatures, both real and imagined. Carole took it all in, breathless. Frankie watched her stare, smiling somewhat shyly.

“And I waited.”

They had moved inside, and they were standing in front of a magnificent stained glass window. It consumed the entire wall between the first and the second floor of the castle. Images of peacocks and water lilies, koi fish and coy maidens, willow trees weeping and satyrs peeking. Carole could not help but clap in delight at the window; it was just that glorious. Frankie smiled smugly at her reaction.

“And I waited.”

Finally, they had reached the most famous part of the castle. Almost touching, together they were staring up at a breathtaking vaulted ceiling, painted with images both whimsical and theological. An apparent LSD trip fused with iconic traditions of the ancient past: Hieronymus Bosch tongues a molly: the surreal marries the celestial, as aliens interact with angels, and extinct birds swoop with futuristic airplanes, giggling awe at all manner of fantasies caught in fresco, dreams turned to divinity.

“And I waited some more. Honestly, I thought the waiting would drive me mad. But finally the day came . . . following a little science, a little prayer, and a lot of instinct. The vintage was ready. She was ready. It was time to meet up with my boys. The Bonesmen.”

CHAPTER NINE:  
THE BONESMEN IMBIBE. AGAIN.

*“Wine gave a sort of gallantry to their own failure.”*

*-F. Scott Fitzgerald*

*“Wine talks; ask anyone. The oracle at the street corner; the uninvited guest at the wedding feast; the holy fool. It ventriloquizes. It has a million voices. It unleashes the tongue, teasing out secrets you never meant to tell, secrets you never even knew. It shouts, rants, whispers. It speaks of great plans, tragic loves, and terrible betrayals. It screams with laughter. It chuckles softly to itself. It weeps in front of its own reflection. It revives summers long past and memories best forgotten. Every bottle a whiff of other times, other places, every one. . . a humble miracle.”*

*-Joanne Harris*

PART ONE: WOMAN WINE BEGUILLES

*“I AM DRINKING STARS!” --The monk Dom Perignon*

You could have the events of that night described to you in painstaking detail, and you still would not believe that it all happened. You could have the

events of that night described to you by someone who could prove that they were there, and you still would not believe that it all happened. You could have seen the sub rosa video of the events of that night, which captured everybody's marvelous insanity in painstaking detail, and you still would not believe that it all happened.

But it is all part of the story, so here goes.

There has never been, nor will there ever be again, a night quite like the night that Frankie witnessed on that chilly Friday evening in early autumn, in The Tombs. They had each finished their glass of wine. For some reason, against character, none of them chose to sip the wine, as any self-respecting connoisseur would do, but rather they all gulped their glasses dry, sensing something mystical in the majesty of these particular dead grapes. (And I must mention oh-so-fleetingly one of the most fascinating, yet ultimately unsolved, conundrums regarding this enchanted bottle of wine drunk on this enchanted evening: some glasses came out sparkling, others flatly and clearly not so. Some poured out white, some poured out red. Zola's came out rosé. Who can't explain it? Who can tell you why? Fools would give you reasons. Wise men would never try. We are talking about Woman Wine here, after all.)

So now here, for your horror and amusement, are their reactions:

\*ASIDE: Ah--but before we get to the particulars of each Bonesman's reaction to the marvelous, maniacal, miraculous Woman Wine, there is one detail we must add:

As if this entire night was not strange enough, there were, as was the protocol, Secret Service agents lurking in the shadows around that moonlit monolith known as The Tombs. Tonight, the president's most trusted pair were at the helm, and although they were fearsome foes when provoked, they

got on more like a Laurel and Hardy routine than a pair of presidential protectors.

One of them was old school, gristled, by the book, beefy in build, and educated almost exclusively in matters regarding presidential protection. He cared not for culture, nor for the concerns of the high society circles in which the President moved. This man can only go by his first name, for secrecy's sake, and he shall be known as Hank. Also Beefhead.

The other was bookish, dapper, and cared very much for the aforementioned niceties of civilized strata. He saw himself as part of the tapestry of the history of the glorious United States, and while he did not need to be a prominent thread, he deeply desired, at the very least, to do the weave proud. The tapestry man--who was as short as regulation allowed--had red kinky hair that was cut shortish and plastered back. This man can also only be known by his Christian name, and he shall be known as Peter. Also, Ginger. He had learned to live with this appellation. He chose to believe it had been applied to him because he was such an extraordinary dancer.

(Hank is one rank above Peter in this equation. But one would not know that if one were to spy on them; particularly in this moment, when we find ourselves peeping as Peter reaches for the binoculars, almost grabbing them from his beefy partner with the perpetually scowling face.)

"I should get to use these because I read lips, you know. You knew I read lips, right?"

"Yes, I know you read lips, I KNOW YOU READ LIPS, cripes, everybody knows you can read lips. Woohoo. I know Bando and Eskrima, do you see me telling everybody I meet?"

"Hey, they're all toasting something! Everybody's lifting a glass."

"What are they toasting to?"

Peter the Ginger had the binoculars trained on the window.

“Can’t tell. The person giving the toast has his back to me. And the bottle is turned around so I can’t read the label either. Oh, dang, now there is some condensation on the window, so I can’t really read the legs on the wine glasses either.”

Hank whacked Peter with his leather gloves.

“You idiot! What the hell do I care from wine legs?”

“Well, I was just thinking about that debacle with the state dinner and the wine from Montana. It was a dinner for the President of France, for Pete’s sake. Talk about international incident. . .”

“Shut up about all that. Just keep your eye on the president!”

And now, we return to the reactions of the individual Bonesmen:

Steve Hill had a way of drinking a glass of wine as though it were a bottle of beer, with all the sounds, gestures, the verbal and the non-verbal, that one might imagine. Either you get this or you do not, but it is not a thing that lends itself to being explained, so suffice it to say, he guzzled his wine fast, and even belched when he finished. He briefly looked around at his compatriots—and then, the effect of the wine began to set in.

And then, Steve Hill, the good friend to all but slightly corrupt FBI agent, produced a variety of balls from seemingly nowhere, stood up, and began to juggle. He was really very good. What made it even more bizarre, is that as he juggled, he began reciting the elements of the periodic table. When he finished that, he began to recite a perfect list of the lineage of the kings and queens of Europe. Then he grew quirkier, reciting a list of American cities with obscene names: “. . . *Latex, Texas, Big Sag, Montana, Ding Dong, Texas, Wanker’s Corner, Oregon, Blue Ball, Arkansas, Big Bottom, Washington, Cooter, Missouri, Buttzville, New Jersey, Three Way, Arizona, Climax, Michigan, Intercourse, Pennsylvania. . .*” But perhaps most peculiar of all—as he was doing all of this, everybody just

went on with what *they* were doing, finding his performance to be not the least bit unusual . . . “*Toad Suck, Arkansas, Sugar Tit, South Carolina, Knob Lick, Kentucky, Beaver Lick, Kentucky, Bumpass, Virginia, Assawoman, Virginia, Pee Pee Town, Ohio, Dickshooter, Idaho, Slickpoo, Idaho, Spread Eagle, Wisconsin, Embarrass, Minnesota, Climax, New York . . .*”

Cole Donovan, the painfully handsome actor, whose cross to bear was that his good looks kept people from seeing how intelligent he truly was, had a particularly unexpected reaction to the wine. Cole Donovan rose from his chair, and walked over to the kitchen adjoining the meeting room. It was only separated by a dining island and stools, so Cole could keep an eye on what everybody else was doing, and they, in turn could watch him.

That's it,” Cole announced, “I've had it! I have had it! I love her, and I can't wait to spend the rest of my life with her, but I've had it!”

Everybody knew what he was talking about. Cole Donovan was finally getting married, but his fiance had hijacked the wedding, and was making everybody miserable in the process. She was charming, gorgeous, a brilliant screenwriter, and Cole couldn't have cared less about how much money she was spending on the wedding, nor about any of the other niggling details that seemed to mean so much to her.

But she had insisted they have a vegan wedding cake. He hated vegan food. Despised it. He had suffered through endless samples of the vegan wedding cakes that she was considering. And they were all simply awful. Strangely enough, they had their biggest fight to date over this very matter. Perhaps it was the fact that he knew all the guests would hate the vegan cake, or perhaps it was that he was feeling whipped by this woman, and it was a little early in the marriage to feel whipped. But he decided, after that very fine glass of wine, that he was going to bake the goddamn wedding cake. He was a great chef; he had run his own catering company in very demanding Beverly Hills,

before he got his big break. He knew he could pull this off. And tonight, he would make the sample. He set to work. Damn, that was a good glass of wine, he thought to himself. So. This would be his cake rehearsal.

Standing just a few feet from Cole was none other than the President of the United States of America. And where did his mind drift to, while under the influence of the elixir? Poetry. That was how Michael St. Croix decided to express himself, when the Woman Wine hit him. And hit him it did. It felt like being slapped in the face with the naughty flowing tail of the sassiest little filly you could ever want to break and ride. Rhymes and images, similies and metaphors, sonnets and stars, ballads and bile, haikus and heroes and hymen, monuments and merkins and martinis, roses and coffins and orangutans and topiary. Verses and villains and vineyards and vaginas, couplets and corks and crucifixes and cocks. . .In the words of the immortal T.S. Eliot, *“I am moved by fancies that are curled around these images, and cling: The notion of some infinitely gentle, infinitely suffering thing.”*

Poetry. That was where his mind journeyed; it was to the outer reaches of the rhyming sphere that his heart went while under the influence Woman Wine. The President stood up. He started with Samuel Taylor Coleridge. He stared off in the darkness at nothing, and began speaking in a gorgeous voice that sounded like Ronald Colman: *“In Xanadu did Kubla Khan A stately pleasure dome decree, Where Alph, the sacred river ran Through caverns measureless to man, Down to a sunless sea. . .”*

But the other Bonesmen were not awestruck. They all registered on some level that he was reciting poetry, but they had also known this guy since he was a seventeen year old freshman with acne, and they had been hearing him yammer on about one thing or another for decades. This didn't phase them.

Meanwhile, in the dark alley adjoining The Tombs, the Secret Service pair watched.

“What’s he doing, what’s he doing?” asked Hank of Peter, who was hogging the binoculars.

“Well sir, this is going to sound strange, but the President is standing. . . and. . . he’s reciting poetry!” answered Peter, dumbstruck. “It’s. . .uh. . . Coleridge—no wait, he’s moved on. Percy Bysshe Shelley, to be specific. A poem called “*Love’s Philosophy*”. It’s very romantic. Great seduction stuff.”

“Is there a woman in the group that we didn’t see?”

“No sir.”

“So he’s reciting love poetry to a bunch of guys?”

“Well, they aren’t exactly listening, sir. They’re all just sort of drifting off by themselves, doing their own thing.”

“This is very weird.” Hank scowled, yanking at his shorts that were riding up, as if this assignment wasn’t crummy enough.

“OK, he’s doing Dante now!” announced Peter, his eyes trained on the upper floor. “Specifically, ‘*La Vita Nuova*’. That was really hard for me to grasp in college. I mean, pure love from afar, what’s up with that? I was a young man with hormones, ya know? Celibacy. Mon Dieu! Worse than Chicken-in-a-Can. Another ghastly memory from those bygone days. . .”

“What?!”

“Oh, I love this next one!” effused Peter, lipreading. “He’s saying, “*When I Have Fears That I May Cease to Be.*”

Hank perked up at this information.

“Wait, the President is afraid? Why would the President cease to be? What’s happening, is he in danger?”

“No, no, sir, It’s Keats.”

“It’s ‘eats’?”



“John Keats,” replied the Ginger, condescendingly. “And for what it’s worth, the poem’s pretty damn prescient on the part of the poet, too, given how young Keats was when he died.”

“What are you going on about?”

But Peter the Ginger wasn’t listening, he was looking intently through the binoculars, imagining the President’s voice as he read the man’s lips. Then, Ginger nodded knowingly.

“OK, I get it. He’s doing sort of a review of the great love poems. Shelley, Keats--why hasn’t he done Shakespeare? That makes no sense. There’s a thousand great love sonnets. That’s odd. Then again, there is a growing school of people who think that the Bard is overrated. And maybe even a compilation of numerous anonymous authors and authors who did not wish to claim authorship--you know, Raleigh, Bacon, Marlowe. Duchess of Pembroke.”

“I hate it when we’re assigned together.”

“Hate is just the other side of the love coin, sir.

“Ech. Shut up already. . . ”

For Hollywood’s darling Darius Damian, that seemingly flawless man (and in fact he had no deep, dark secrets, was indeed a very good guy, and had faults that were only the smallest of vices and idiosyncrasies), for Hollywood’s darling, this genius producer/director (who amassed Academy Awards the way some people collect action figures, or thimbles--no less than three dozen nominations--and the movies that he had helmed had won a collective 89 statues), it was to be not a night of film or theatre, but of music.

Because while this man was known for making great movies, his secret passion was opera. That should have been evident from the Academy Awards he won for turning operas into fine films, and the few people who called themselves his dearest friends all knew that you could catch him during one of

his private nights, alone in his palatial home, listening to opera and being carried away on flights of fancy. Even weeping like a baby. Or, if he'd had a couple of drinks, singing away, like he thought he was Pavarotti.

So. Opera. The beloved arias. But because he was a tad drunk on Woman Wine, these were not just any arias, they would be the great romantic arias.

And so the night proper began for Darius: after finishing his wine, without missing a beat, he got up from his chair and burst into a rousing rendition of--what else?--"*Una furtiva lagrima*", from "*L'Elisir d'Amore*", because it was about a love potion wine. The other Bonesmen were shocked at how extraordinarily good he was, and they all surmised as how he could have been a professional opera singer. His lead role in "*Pirates of Penzance*", way back in the day, had been impressive, all had agreed. But nothing like this. This was professional grade opera.

When he finished the Donizetti number, he continued with the love-betrayal theme, ending this set with the beloved "*Vesti la giubba*" from "*Il Pagliacci*", and Verdi's immortal "*La donna è mobile*".

But *what*, you may be asking yourself, *what is going on with Bill Williams?* What was the richest man on the planet doing, as he lolled under the influence of wine infused with the soul of a woman? Well, the world had long agreed that Bill Williams seemed to be generally a very good egg. Honest, ethical, but above all, charitable. Charitable to a fault, some would say. And happily married. His marriage was famous for never showing cracks, no skeletons in closets had ever been found. By all accounts--and even according to their dearest friends and deepest leakers--they were both still very much in love. Bill Williams: happy, healthy, rich, admired, respected, envied . . . so, it should come as no surprise that he spent the night dancing. Yes, dancing.

As soon as he began to feel the influence of the wine, he jumped up from his chair and began to wriggle and writhe. It would seem that he was dancing

to the Verdi aria that Darius was singing, because as anybody who has been to Taranto, Apulia, would of course tell you, he was executing--and with great flair, I might add--the steps to the Tarantella. After a bit, however, he found the steps did not match the music, so he switched to the Saltarello. His eyes were closed, and he seemed to be in a world of his own imagining, as he hopped with Cupid's own joy. The Woman Wine was hitting him hard, in the most wonderful way.

Suddenly he had become his own secret fantasy--he was an NFL superstar, a burly man of football, but no ordinary celebrity was he: he was Donald Driver, and he became, in that terpsichorean moment, everything that Bill Williams was not: he was thick and muscled, dextrous and nimble, black and beautiful. Donald Driver né Bill Williams was now not only dancing to "*La donna è mobile*", he was being cheered by a hallucinated crowd for his grace. In one moment, by a stadium full of people, in another moment by the more intimate triumvirate of Len and Carrie and Bruno. And for reasons beyond all explaining (perhaps the experience of the wine was akin to being stoned), Bill Williams had an inexplicable and raging craving for Doritos.

But when Darius Damian segued to another aria, some switch went off in Bill William's head, and he was no longer feeling inspired to dance to opera. Suddenly he grabbed his phone, made some calls, and he started delegating chores and calling in favors.

"Hey, Lucille, you're in charge of theater props, right? I've got a big favor to ask. Actually it's a bunch of little favors. In return, I promise you a big fat check to cover the spring production. Oh heck, let's just say we'll do that whole theatre rebuild we've been talking about. Okay? The first thing I'm going to need is some set pieces, and I'm also going to need a bunch of costumes. A straw hat, and a tuxedo, and I want one of those coconut bras..."

His list went on and on. And on. Even after Lucille had some of her minions deliver these requests in bags and boxes to the rear door of the strange

building--it is worth noting that these delivery persons ran into kids from the local grocers, delivering baking supplies to Cole in the kitchen--but even after Lucille had these things delivered, there were more things that Bill requested, And more, and more, and she was happy to do it. Because she knew that everybody would be elated about the big check that was to follow.

But back to Darius Damian, and his evening at the opera. For the first few numbers, rising and singing had been enough. But then, slowly, he made his way out to the balcony, and announced his next piece to the dark and starry night: Radames' final twin arias from Aida, "*La fatal pietra sopra me si chiuse!*", segueing into "*Morir! sì pura e bella!*"

*"La fatal pietra sopra me si chiuse. . . Ecco la tomba mia. Del dì la luce più non vedrò. . . Non revedrò più Aida. Aida, ove sei tu? Possa tu almeno viver felice e la mia sorte orrendas sempre ignorar! Qual gemito! Una larva. . . Una vision. . . No! forma umana È questa. Ciel! Aida!" . . . ("The fatal stone has closed upon me. . . Here is my tomb. The light of day never again shall I see. . . Never again shall I see Aida. Aida, where are you? May you at least live happily and never know my dreadful fate! What cry is that? A phantom. . . A vision. . . No! It is a human form. Heavens! Aida!")*

And then, drawn by the music, the President began to walk from the spot where he had been standing in the middle of the room, towards the balcony, ever so slowly, making his way out the open doors and standing next to Darian. Even as he walked, he began reciting the poetry of Oscar Wilde:

*"Tread lightly, she is near under the snow. Speak gently, she can hear the daisies grow. Lily-like, white as snow, she hardly knew she was a woman, so sweetly she grew. . ."*

The movement of the President was not lost on the agents, who were still down in the shadows, secreted away in the alley, ever vigilant. Peter the Ginger was still squinting and straining through the binoculars:

“Wait--wait, he’s coming out on the balcony.”

“Shit, we need to flank, dammit, I knew we needed sharpshooters!”

“Hank. Just let it go. Let it go. You gotta have a little faith. You think some crazed assassin is hanging around the ivy covered buildings, waiting to take a shot at the President? Everybody thinks POTUS is at Disneyland. We sent his double there this morning, remember?”

The Beefhead grumbled and muttered. But Ginger was focused on the President’s recitation:

“Oh, Mr. President, you’re killing me! Trop beau pour vivre!”

He turned and looked excitedly at his partner.

“He’s doing “*Requiescat*”. Oscar Wilde. You know, sir, a lot of people think it’s about a woman he loved. But of course he was gay, so a lot of people think it’s about a man he loved. But really, it’s about his sister. She died when she was only ten, can you believe it? He was twelve.”

Hank, in a rare moment of sensitivity, stopped to listen to his boss the Commander in Chief, as he rhapsodized about the dead. And through it all, Darius Damian sang:

*“...Coffin board, heavy stone, Lie on her breast. I vex my heart alone, she is at rest. Peace, peace, she cannot hear lyre or sonnet. All my life’s buried here, Heap earth upon it.”*

*No! forma umana È questa. Ciel! Aida!” . . . Morir! sì pura e bella! Morir per me d'amore. . . Degli anni tuoi nel fiore Fuggir la vita! T'avea il cielo per l'amor creata, ed io t'uccido per averti amata! No, non morrai! Troppo t'amai! Troppo sei*

*bella! (No! It is a human form. Heavens! Aida! Die! So pure and lovely! To die for love of me in the flower of your youth to fly from life! Heaven created you for love, and I am killing you through loving you! No, you shall not die! I have loved you too much! You are too beautiful!”)*

It was as a magic spell, the words of the President and the singing of Damian, blending together in the heavy, black air. The agents smiled.

And now, for something completely different, quoth the wriggling python: the dark revelations of the chilling Milton Amsterdam, under the precious and sometimes demonic influence of Women Wine.

Milton Amsterdam, the man who, in these corrupt times, basically controlled the economy of the United States (and by de facto, much of the rest of the world’s as well), the goddam chairman of the goddam Federal Reserve, for Christ’s sake, he finished his glass of necromantic nectar in a series of long, quick gulps. Then he sat for a minute, and pondered how it felt. And then he went over to the middle of the room, sat down on the floor, and got himself prone. Oh, he spread himself out good and prone. Nobody took particular notice of it, lost as they were in their own weird trips, but it was something to witness. If any American but these seven men in the room alone with him had seen it, they would be worried indeed. And indeed they should be.

Milton started muttering. He just laid there, stared at the ceiling, and muttered: “--*spit in the food, pissed in the pot, even put a turd in it, I thought it was hilarious, hey I was young. . . more money than most people see in a lifetime. . . told them I had nothing to declare, afraid they could see me sweat, and terrified that I had suffocated them all. . . fifty thousand dollars dead and down the drain. . . threatened to expose me. . . couldn’t afford to have it come out, I had no choice . . . she said we should leave a note, but I said nobody saw us, let’s get the hell out of here. . . nobody blackmails Milton Amsterdam. . . gave him a duffel bag full of cash,*

*but only to distract him for just long enough. . . explained to me the Onion Network Router, TOR, I could see its potential. . . millions and millions of dollars. . . very dark in there. . . goddammit, she would not stop crying. . . I gave him a chance to give it back, prick. . . ”*

In the words of that other divine Bette, *“Fasten your seatbelts. It’s going to be a bumpy night.”*

Perhaps the most subdued, but brilliant and productive response to the wine, came from none other than Zola Adesa, considered to be one of the most respected journalists in the world, winner of both the Nobel and the Pulitzer, all the more impressive because he was a black man in a country populated with pockets of people who still wanted to put the black man down.

Even though he was a journalist, Zola Adesa was not a big fan of modern technology, nor social media. He felt it was very bad for the brain; he thought it was lethal to concentration and creativity. But he was in the business, and he had been dragged into the modern world kicking and screaming. One of the things he had taken to doing, and come to really enjoy, was dictating his stories, rather than typing them the old-fashioned way. And on those secret occasions when he dipped into writing fiction, high fantasy (he published under a pen name that few people knew about it), he found that the machine's ability to type as fast as he could speak was a miracle. It was mind bending, positively Neruda-esque. For he could think very quickly.

As a point of habit, he did not generally start to dictate until he had pondered his story a long time, as he walked, exercised, listened to music, walked his dog, sat in the bathtub. So when he sat down, the words, the story, came fast and furious. And he just loved that the machine could keep up. During these times, he went into kind of a reverie that some people call “the zone”. And when he got done with it, he felt cleansed, yet violated by some

higher muse. Filled up, and yet empty. The great oxymorons that only the true artists will ever understand. And so, stoked with his glass of wine, Zola pulled out his small, sleek, tablet, and began to speak.

Zola had an anal retentive side; he had figured out a long time ago that it took about three minutes to read a page of text aloud. To read it artfully, that is. Most people rushed horribly when they spoke, or when they read--both disrespecting their own thoughts, and the audience, in the process. What was the rush, he often wondered? After all, if a thing is worth saying. . . but back to the math. Zola had learned that if he broke his own rules and picked up the pace, talking at the speed of a top rate auctioneer, he could actually speak over 300 words per minute--a page of prose. And looking back on it, since the entire episode lasted between five and six hours, before everybody fell into a deep and delicious sleep, Zola Adesa was able to create his next novel in one evening. In six hours, he produced almost four hundred pages. Yes, it would take some rewriting, but the germ was there. And this novel would go on to win several spectacular awards and prizes. It would also be made into a major feature film. Granted, that was largely because his good friend Darius Damian would later decide to make it into a film, but it was nonetheless a staggering story, and a smashing legacy.

Lastly, of course, was Frankie. Perhaps Frankie's reaction was the most bizarre of all, in that it was not bizarre at all. We cannot know exactly what was going on in Frankie's mind. Or in his heart. Or in his soul. But this much was agreed upon, that Frankie--at least from the outside looking in--Frankie, who had indeed drunk deeply, had no reaction to the wine. In point of fact, his reaction was to assiduously observe the reaction of others, to record it, even. But of course Frankie would do that. Frankie was a scientist. Of course he would record all of the reactions.



The effects of the wine was to go on for about five or six hours, after which all of those who had imbibed fell into a deep sleep. It was a wonderful, rich sleep filled with magnificent dreams, the kind of sleep that you imagine them to be having in “*A Midsummer Night's Dream*”, when Puck bestows the enchanted drops on the eyelids of fairies and mortals alike. Good stuff, if you can get it.

But this night is only just getting started.

## PART TWO: WOMAN WINE ENSNARES

Steve Hill was still juggling. He had moved on from balls to variety: an egg, a plunger, and a chainsaw, all at once. He was still reciting lists, all through the juggling performance, but this next list was getting closer to home. Closer to Steve Hill's work, his one true passion. It included all the strange places that contraband had been found by customs agents at assorted ports of entry across the United States: “*geckos in a book*”, “*ecstasy in a Mr. Potato Head*”, “*crystal meth in a corpse*”, “*heroin bags in puppy dogs*”, “*cocaine in her breast implants*”, “*drugged baby tiger in shipment of stuffed tigers*,” “*miniature monkeys in a girdle*”, “*human skeleton in outfit and wig*”. . . And as he proffered this odd information to the universe, his juggling continued flawlessly. The man could have been a headliner in Vegas: the egg, plunger, and chainsaw all remained weighless in his deft hands; no spillage or disaster, no crackage or carving.

Nearby, Cole had finished the “first draft” of the wedding cake, or perhaps the “building blocks” we should say, and he had iced it magnificently--he was Michelangelo, and the icing was his wet fresco--but

Cole was not satisfied. He stood back, and studied his creation. This castle needed a moat, he thought to himself. A lesser baker would make it a dopey icing moat. No, his would be a real moat, with a liner to separate the liquid from the cake. And what to stock the moat with, pray tell?

And only yards away from this amazing feat of haute cuisine (for Cole was undeniably “haute”, by this point in the evening), Bill Williams, the richest man on the planet, was dancing his heart out. He was doing a marvelous mash-up that involved working his way through the popular dances of the twentieth century. The girl who had brought the costumes was dancing with him, and they gyrated their way through some beloved steps that had jollied people out of the Depression, through the war, and beyond, with fan favorites such as the Charleston, the Jitterbug and the Jive, the Boogie Woogie and the Bomba and the Bunny Hop, then they eased into the 60’s with the Mashed Potato, the Shimmy, the Shake, the Twist, the Hokey Pokey, the Poney, the Watusi, the Locomotion, the Limbo, the Harlem Shake, the Macarena. (Now think 70’s, 80’s, and yes, most disco dances were omitted for a reason--fate doesn’t let you amass all that wealth, such as that which was possessed by Bill Williams, unless you have demonstrated to the universe a modicum of good taste.) That said, witness now: The Time Warp, Thriller, Moonwalk, and last but not least, Whip that Nae Nae.

For Darius Damian, suddenly, singing on the balcony to a gathering crowd below was not enough. Without a word, Damian turned around and walked from the balcony, through the room, down the stairs, and out the front door. He had already amassed a group of people listening to him from the street. They did not know what famous man they were listening to, but they did know that his voice was beautiful. He was belting out his next number, heart deep in a rendition of “*Il balen del suo sorriso*”, from “*Il Trovatore*”. As

people on the street stared, Darius Damian walked past them, not really acknowledging them. He seemed both in a trance, yet completely present.

He walked down the block to a pub that drew him like a moth, to its golden lights and happy laughter. He had switched to a medley of great moments from "*La Boheme*", figuring it would appeal to the wild souls of these young students. When he was done with that, it was "*Lucevan e Stella*" and "*Pourquoi me réveiller*" because young people love tragedy, having as they do no real understanding of it. But always, always, whether it was joyful or mournful, the aria of the moment was about loving women: the joy, the insanity, the lust, the soul crushing, the indescribable feeling of power that imbues a man who is inspired by the love of a woman. Needless to say, partiers, mostly young students (who are prone to the romantic anyway), streamed out of bars and restaurants and began to follow him, oh so gorgeous was his singing.

They had no agenda, and most of them were so mesmerized that they forgot to pull out their cell phones to record him; they just wanted to hear him sing. It was as though, in his voice, he was presaging all the heartbreak and hope and madness that was to come to all the young souls gathered around him, whose shared fate--a fate shared with all humans on the planet--was to fall deeply, darkly in love.

Meanwhile, back at The Tombs, the President was whipping up some lyrics on poster board. He scrawled them at lightning speed, then set up a boom box on the balcony. While an instrumental version of "*Subterranean Homesick Blues*" played on the boombox, Michael St. Croix launched into a Dylan-esque version of The Bard's "*My Mistress Eyes are Nothing Like the Sun.*" And everybody watching him that night agreed that you could have easily mistaken him for Dylan, except that it was the President of the United States:

*“My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun; Coral is far more red than her lips' red; If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun; If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.*

Down in the alley, a wave of weariness washed over Hank.

“What’s Twinkle Toes up to now, or dare I ask?” he queried, yawning. The President’s words dropped on them from on high, along with the autumn leaves, catching a breeze jazz ride down.

*“I love to hear her speak, yet well I know, that music hath a far more pleasing sound; I grant I never saw a goddess go. . .”*

Hank rolled his eyes, then turned and stared at Peter the Ginger.

“And if that’s his code name, how come he ain’t dancin’ in this fruity talent pageant?”

“Uh, I believe that ‘Twinkle Toes’ is a reference to a story circulating around NASA, from his guest astronaut stint.”

*. . . “I have seen roses damasked, red and white, but no such roses see I in her cheeks. And in some perfumes is there more delight, than in the breath that from my mistress reeks. . .”*

“No kiddin’?”

“No kidding, sir. Apparently, you see, his toes really do twinkle. Very odd, apparently. Feeds into that theory that—”

“--Zip it, Ginger.”

And the President waxed on, in the groove:

*“My mistress when she walks treads on the ground. And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare, as any she belied with false compare.”*

As these enchanted words and notes were soaring up into the heavens, Milton Amsterdam could not have been in a lower place, although he would soon try to accomplish just that. Milton was still muttering in the middle of the floor: *“ . . . Most beautiful hotel room, so beautiful I cried. . . later I stole everything in the room that wasn't nailed down, the shampoo and towels, robe and slippers, everything in the mini bar, even the comforter and curtains, then I dared those little B&B fags to sue my dad. . . knew I shouldn't have stayed till last call, shouldn't have had that drink, didn't mean to hit it, what choice did I have, it was suffering. . . told me that it would be untraceable if I went through bitcoin. . . he was only fourteen and I knew it was wrong. . . and then I couldn't stop. . . dozens over as many years. . . threatened her if she told anybody. . . I couldn't stop watching it, sometimes I'd even bid on them, so young and innocent. . . paid them to break into the bitch's house and take it. . . ”*

### PART THREE: WOMAN WINE ENCHANTS

Steve Hill was now reciting a long compendium of animals with college degrees and other certifications, dogs and cats mostly. The names came from a printout that was on a bulletin board deep in the bowels of a building in Quantico, Virginia, home of the much heralded FBI Training Academy. The list was funny, but not funny. The animal names had been culled from a massive FBI sting into fraudulent universities and similarly situated organizations. The file from which the printout had come, (the first file in the cabinet, “A” for “Absurd”), was opened and examined from time to time, when students at the Academy were suffering from burnout, and the whole training semester appeared to be in danger of going awry; things like this always seemed to save

the day. Instructors felt it was important to emphasize the lighter side of FBI work, from time to time.

As he juggled, Steve would recite the name of the pet, and the circumstances of his petdegree. Included on the list were scam degree luminaries such as Oliver Greenhalgh, a cat who had been accepted as a fellow of the English Association of Estate Agents and Valuers after a payment of eleven guineas (his two references were not verified), the beloved Colby Nolan, a housecat who was awarded an MBA in 2004 by Trinity Southern University, a Dallas-based diploma mill (whose application claimed experience at a fast-food restaurant, babysitting, and a paper route--a curriculum vitae which so impressed the folks in Dallas that they offered him an MBA for an extra hundred bucks), Ollie the dog, whose master reinvented her as Dr. Olivia Doll, and whose credentials included "past associate of the Shenton Park Institute for Canine Refuge Studies", where she had been a rescue dog. She was then named associate editor of the Global Journal of Addiction and Rehabilitation Medicine. But perhaps the Trainees' favorite, though was Maxwell Sniffingwell, an English Bulldog whose application to Belford University in Humble, Texas included Sniffingwell's work as a reproductive specialist, noting his "natural ability in theriogenology" and "experimental work with felines" and his understanding of the merits of specialization despite a desire to "do them all." His application was accepted upon the \$549 payment to the university. All these canines and felines, and so many more, were included in Steve's juggling recitation. As for the juggling, this time, Special Agent Hill was juggling spaghetti. It had panache, but was of short duration.

Back in the kitchen, Cole Donovan was daunted. Droplets from the water wheel were getting into the battery pack and causing the lights to short. Cole thought perhaps he would try the sparklers again. He also didn't want these

electrical problems shorting out the opening of the giant clam shell, with the big reveal. . .

Bill, Bill, Bill. You have seen him talking to classrooms and sharing the stage at expos with his lovely wife; you have seen him having dinner with the President of the United States, and feeding dinner to starving children all over the continent of Africa. But you haven't seen Bill Williams until you have seen him Irish Step dance. Arms rigid at his side, upper body frozen, and lower body a symphony of movement. Good old Bill's lower extremities were clicking and stamping and tapping and jigging and hornpiping until the Kerry Cattle came home.

During this portion of the evening, when he was featuring traditional local dances from around the globe, he also engaged in some square dancing, which unfortunately was underwhelming, as there was really nobody to call out the steps, and he could only intermittently get some of the other Bonesmen to help him.

Meanwhile, somewhere out in the darkness, the agents were still struggling to remain on the alert, even after hours of madness caused by the Woman Wine:

"I did not see that coming!" This from the Ginger, who was still hogging the binoculars.

"What?" asked Beefhead.

"Plath! He's doing a Sylvia Plath cycle."

Both men craned their necks upward, as the President, now inexplicably wearing a lovely pashmina shawl over his shoulders against the encroaching night chill, rhapsodized:

*"I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead; I lift my lids and all is born again. (I think I made you up inside my head.) . . . The stars go waltzing out in blue*

*and red, And arbitrary blackness gallops in: I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead. . . I dreamed that you bewitched me into bed And sung me moon-struck, kissed me quite insane. (I think I made you up inside my head.). . .*

Down in the alley, Beefhead rolled his eyes and glanced around furtively, suddenly paranoid.

“Say, Ginger, if you see any of the press--and I mean so much as a stringer for the student newspaper--I want you to take ‘em down. This crap gets out, and they’ll invoke the 25th. What the fuck is Twinkle Toes on about?”

But up on the balcony, the President continued undeterred, lost in a world of his own grapey hallucinations:

*“ . . . God topples from the sky, hell's fires fade: Exit seraphim and Satan's men: I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead. . . I fancied you'd return the way you said, But I grow old and I forget your name. (I think I made you up inside my head.). . . I should have loved a thunderbird instead; At least when spring comes they roar back again. I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead. (I think I made you up inside my head.)”*

“*Mad Girl’s Love Song*” dispensed with, the President charged ahead with his next selection. Ginger’s reaction was itself a bit mad girlish, in truth.

“Perfect! It’s the last poem anyone would expect from him, but then again, he always talks about empowerment of women. ‘*Love is a Parallax.*’ A classic.”

“What the hell does that mean, ‘love is a parallax,’” growled Hank. “Love isn’t a parallax, a parallax is what a tactical scope fixes for long range sniper shooting.”

Peter turned to Hank: “*So we could rave on, darling, you and I, until the stars tick out a lullaby about each cosmic pro and con!*”



Hank glowered at him.

“Faggot.”

“Do you know how tortured Sylvia Plath was?” countered Peter, suddenly very intense. “How she was ultimately killed by the depth of her love for all things? It drove her mad, mad, I tell you! She put her head in an oven and turned on the gas, for chrissake! Qu’el damage!”

“ I don’t think it works like that.”

“Huh?”

“I think you have to turn the gas on first,” said Hank, “Then, you stick your head in.”

“Boy, you have got the sensitivity of a dung beetle.”

“Oh yeah? Well, did you know that dung beetles mate for life? Most people don’t even do that.”

“You’re shitting me.”

Hank burst out in guffaws. Peter sputtered like a bathtub toy.

“What? What’s so funny.”

“Shitting me? *Shitting me!* Dung beetles? Get it?”

“This is one weird night, sir.”

Meanwhile, blocks away from the shadowy Tombs, Darius Damian's night of singing morphed into what all the very, very best nights of singing become: a glorious romp in a grand fountain. It was a breathtaking fountain, a huge fountain, a fountain constructed to celebrate the toppling of the Rex Order that had terrorized the United States for so long. As Darius strode through the open square to the fountain, like Maria with her guitar case prancing through the streets of Salzburg, he sang a song to honor the magnificent waterworks: “*À une fontaine*”, from “*Chansons de Ronsard*”:

*“Écoute un peu, fontaine vive, en qui j'ai rebusi souvent, couché tout plat dessus ta rive, oisif à la fraîcheur du vent, quand l'été ménager moissonne Le sein de Cérès dévêtu, et l'aire par compas résonne Gémissant sous le blé battu. Ainsi toujours puisses-tu être en dévote religion au boeuf et au bouvier champêtre de ta voisine région! Ainsi toujours la lune claire voie à minuit au fond d'un val Les Nymphes près de ton repaire a mille bonds mener le bal!”*

*(“Listen to me, living fountain, from whom I oft have drunk, flat on my belly overlooking your bank, lazy in the cool breeze, while the summer harvest's Ceres' unclad breast and the air whimpers beneath the beaten wheat. So may you always be in religion to all those who drink from you or who pasture their cattle on your green banks. So may nymphs forever dance around you in the moonlit midnight.”)*

Once he arrived at the magnificent spewing sculpture, Darius wasted no time jumping in. A few followers, ready to join their new hero, jumped in as well. And then, he dove under. His hovering fan base observed this immediately, and after a few seconds, panic set in. For while this strange minstrel did not exactly appear to be high or stoned, it was clear that he was quite disconnected from reality, and everybody, in that instant, feared the worst.

And just as the strong young bucks in the group were going to dive for him, Darius arose out of the waters--naked as the day he was born. To this day, nobody could figure out what unseen force was lifting him up, as though he were Esther Williams doing a ballerina's pointe on some hidden raising board. But there was no board, no trick. No hidden special effect. Darius Damian was just rising out of the water like a god, like some son of Neptune.

And he was singing about love:

*“Quando sugl' arsi campi cende la pioggia estiva, le foglie i fior ravniva! E il bosco, il preticello rosto si fa più bello, ritorna a verdeggiar. Così quest' alma amante fra la sua dolce speme, dopo le lunghe pene, comincia a respirar!”*

*(“When upon the parched fields summer's rain falls, the leaves, the flowers revive, forest and meadows are beautified, and once again grow green. So likewise this loving soul, in its sweet hope, after its long torments, begins to breathe anew.”)*

It was beautiful. Darius thought he had never felt so complete in his life, and that if he were to die now, that would be just fine. But he was to live several more decades, only occasionally wistful about the truth that he would never again have a life as fine as this one.

Milton Amsterdam had moved outside now, and was standing in the backyard of the Bonesman's castle haunt. “. . . *made the poor pledges do all those things, my own goddam kid. . .*” He had grabbed a shovel from The Tomb's catacombs, and was digging furiously at the stubborn earth. “. . . *Goddam fraternity, should never have turned over the evidence. . .*” But it was an odd arrangement, this shovelling project. Milton had scrounged a large piece of burlap, about the size of a bed sheet, and tied it to a nearby tree so that it formed a kind of hammock bag. “. . . *Not my son's fault if the kid can't hold his liquor, not his fault if the kid died. . .*” Although it made his task trebly hard, he took each shovelful of dirt and hoisted it up over his head, tossing it into the hammock. “. . . *My son had made fun of him, called him names. . .*”

And through it all, none of the others paid a bit of attention. Actually, that is not *entirely* true. Cole was on his baking binge, and as Amsterdam's pit was getting deeper and deeper, Cole did step outside to offer Milton a dark chocolate fudge bacon brownie. Milton, who had now dug so deep that he was standing in the pit, took the brownie, thanked Cole graciously, took a wee nibble, and returned to his work. (As did Cole.) Milton was working up a fierce

and inelegant sweat. His eyes were wild, his body set to its grim task. Digging, digging. “. . . *set a homeless man on fire, but what could I do, he’s my son!*” . . .

The wine had been in everybody's system for hours now, and although a traditionalist in the world of chemical highs might say that the effects of the Woman Wine were wearing off, part of its mystique was that it was giving everybody a final, glorious, terrifying, celestial, euphoric, demonic kick in the pants--as is true with women also, no? And as for the penultimate, upending swell, well, the precise nature of that last rush seemed to depend on who was drinking it, of course, *that alone* determined the exact essence of the last rise on the roller coaster ride--or at least one might have observed, given the crystalline clarity of hindsight. No, this was not acting like normal wine. But then again, who had ever before drunk wine infused with a woman’s soul?

#### PART FOUR: WOMAN WINE LIBERATES

Steve Hill was still juggling. . . *and*, he was reciting verbatim the entire text of the Wikipedia entry “Hamsteria”, about a kingdom of hamsters, a one page history also posted on the bulletin board at Quantico, along with the aforementioned petdegree one, to lighten the mood. It had been uncovered as part of a major sting operation on purposeful and fraudulent Fake News. Stephen Colbert’s mugshot was posted alongside it. He did this while juggling two hamsters and a lizard. (Steve Hill, not Stephen Colbert.) Not that it matters, but here is a bit of trivia regarding The Tombs, Skull and Bones meeting place of infamy. Hamsters lived continuously in the brick residence. There had long been hamsters, (or some pair of animals similarly situated: ferrets, chinchillas, hedgehogs, wallabies, sugar gliders), and always named William and Alphonso (regardless of the creatures’ gender), in honor of the

founders of S&B. Sometimes, depending on the kind of animals in question, or the mood of the Skull and Bones gentlemen in that particular year, they might go by the nicknames, i.e., “Willie and Fonzie”.

The last anybody heard of Steve Hill that night, he was heading out the back door, to cruise the alley for cats.

Back to the cake: Cole was glad that he had studied animatronics as part of his film degree at UCLA. The creature’s movement’s in the frothy moat looked surprisingly natural. And he was glad that he had made the spaceship a separate cake apart from the main cake. He walked around the cake, approaching it and moving away, testing the motion sensor to see if it worked from any 360 degree approach point, and he was elated when it did.

Whether Bill Williams had consciously saved the best for last, we will never know. But it was epic, and to this day, we cannot know how he did it. How he pulled it off. And when I describe it to you, you're going to say that it was all trick photography, and who better to pull off such shenanigans than Bill Williams, computer wiz, the man who had amassed his fortune by being just that. But you have to believe me when I tell you that everybody who was there swore that the performance was like this, as I am about to describe. It was not fixed in the editing. It was not tweaked in post-production. Bill had changed into a different costume, this time a gentleman’s suit, something of a zoot suit, all white, with a white shirt and red vest, red bow tie, red handkerchief in the pocket of his white suit. . . and. . .red socks! With a straw hat, cane, and Oxford saddle shoes, for a finishing touch. He began performing “*Steppin’ Out With My Baby*”, imitating exactly the steps that first dazzled the world in Easter Parade, when Fred Astaire proved to the world without a doubt that the space-time continuum had nothing on him. He was master of the space time-continuum.

And so was Bill Williams. Not only was he a masterful dancer, not only did he recreate the Fred Astaire number perfectly, but he even caused space-time to warp to his will. While a band of extras (who had shown up just in the nick of time, dressed in garish grandiosity like the '40's dancehall hoofers they were supposed to represent), all danced wildly behind him, somehow, somehow, Bill Williams managed to execute his part of the dance in slow motion. And by this I do not mean that he did the dance steps much more dilatoriously. Lugubrious he was not! No, I mean he just really was moving in slow motion. Like I said. Time warp. Space-time Continuum mastery.

Such was the powerful and mesmerizing effect of Woman Wine.

It was a curious matter, and part of the effect of Woman Wine, that one gentleman could be performing his heart out, transported to some ethereal realm that existed only within his own fevered brain, and yet through it all remain blissfully ignorant of some other astonishing performance going on just yards away. So it was that while Bill danced and Steve juggled and Cole festooned, the President continued his recitation:

He was still standing proudly out on the balcony, addressing the night sky, not knowing or caring if there were listeners down on the streets below. He seemed to be performing solely for ghosts, for spirits, for angels--for God, perhaps:

“And now, a compilation of favorite lines from the love poetry of ee cummings. . .” announced the President with a flourish.

Down below in the alley, Peter could not contain himself, he applauded and shook his head with delight. Hank just rolled his eyes.

“The perfect choice, at this point in the performance!”

And then Peter hushed himself, to hear the words of the man who treated punctuation like an x-wife:

*“since feeling is first  
who pays any attention  
to the syntax of things  
will never wholly kiss you;  
wholly to be a fool  
while Spring is in the world  
my blood approves,  
and kisses are a better fate  
than wisdom  
lady i swear by all flowers. Don’t cry  
– the best gesture of my brain is less than  
your eyelids’ flutter which says  
we are for each other; then  
laugh, leaning back in my arms  
for life’s not a paragraph  
And death i think is no parenthesis*

The President stopped, letting the ridiculous, effusive stars flung all above him do their job and shine. Down in the alley, Peter was squealing in delight as the president’s poem choice. He applauded gayly again:

“Such poetry! ‘*Kisses are a better fate than wisdom.*’ You don’t think that’s pure genius?”

Hank couldn’t take it anymore; he slapped Peter the Ginger upside his head.

“Cripes, Pete, what does that even mean? I have to choose between using my brain and my wife kissing me? What if I choose for my goddam fate to be acting smart AND getting laid? I hate poetry.”

But the universe had no time for the cranky agent; the President had launched into his next poem:

*Lady, i will touch you with my mind.  
Touch you and touch and touch  
until you give  
me suddenly a smile, shyly obscene*

*(lady i will  
touch you with my mind.) Touch  
you, that is all,*

*lightly and you utterly will become  
with infinite care*

*the poem which i do not write.”*

When the second cummings poem was over, the President stopped and caught his breath, so transported was he by his own performance. He--and the agents, for that matter--were sure they had heard music accompanying it, but it was not the music that Bill Williams was dancing to. And Darius Damian was far away, roaming the outskirts of the campus. Was it, purely and simply, the music of the spheres, perhaps?

It was at that moment that Peter pulled a slim paperback from inside his suit. It was entitled, "Selected Poems of ee cummings." The other agent stared, dumbfounded.

"You carry his poems in a book around with you?"

Peter looked miffed. "All the best people do," he huffed, and turned his attention back to the President, who had started up again:

*"i carry your heart with me(i carry it in*



*my heart)i am never without it(anywhere  
i go you go,my dear;and whatever is done  
by only me is your doing,my darling)*

*i fear*

*no fate(for you are my fate,my sweet)i want  
no world(for beautiful you are my world,my true)  
and it's you are whatever a moon has always meant  
and whatever a sun will always sing is you*

*here is the deepest secret nobody knows  
(here is the root of the root and the bud of the bud  
and the sky of the sky of a tree called life;which grows  
higher than soul can hope or mind can hide)  
and this is the wonder that's keeping the stars apart*

*i carry your heart(i carry it in my heart)*

And Dear Readers, it would be a terrible omission at this point if we did not reveal that even the burly agent Hank the Tank was falling under the spell of Michael St. Croix and Edward Estlin Cummings. The love poetry went on, but for now, we must return to the shenanigans of Darius Damian.

There can be no question that what happened next for Darius Damian was one of the most moving and mystical scenes of the entire night, even eclipsing the poetry and the dancing. Not too far from The Tombs, there was a no-kill dog shelter. It limped along on contributions, and although it had saved the lives of hundreds of pathetic canines, it was dreary and dirty, and everybody in that small college town knew to expect the dogs to bay all night. If you lived within earshot of the shelter, you just got used to it: the barking

and baying at the moon, all the good night long. And critters, being what they are, this endless chorus of canines provoked an army of alley cats that lived in all the dark streets shooting off from the shelter: in response to the barking, they would yowl and cry at the moon as well. It was quite the symphony, and actually served to reduce the rents of the abodes in that area, although all the politicking in the world could not get people to close down that beloved shelter, or kill those beloved feral cats. This was on Darius Damian's mind when he came up with his next location, for his next performance of arias.

Keep in mind that by now, he had quite the following. Dozens of people had heard him as he sang to them in restaurants and pubs, and they were following him, waiting to see what would happen next. By this point in the evening, many had recognized him. And they were, of course, recording him with their phones. Except for Frankie's covert recording, this is some of the only footage that remains of that strange evening, the first night of the Woman Wine. Still dripping from his fountain adventure, still naked, Darius trudged towards the shelter, the barking getting louder and louder as he got closer and closer.

When he got to the shelter, he stopped. His army of admirers halted at precisely the same moment, freezing in their tracks. The shelter consisted of several dozen indoor confines, with thick plastic flaps that allowed the dogs to move easily into the outdoor portion of their runs. Any dogs that were not outside in the moonlight when Darius and his entourage arrived, quickly darted through the flaps to join the other dogs in the enchanted night, sensing a curious tension on the part of their fellow prisoners. The barking had become louder, more hysterical, more irrational. And that is when Darius Damian began to sing a gorgeous series of arias-- each one so perfectly following the one before it in theme and emotion, that one would have thought he had been planning this performance for weeks. One would have thought that we were all now standing in Lincoln Center, or the Albert Hall. Darius

had, in the spur of the moment, selected these songs precisely for these poor, agitated creatures; the theme in all the arias was “Don’t cry.”

*“Tu, Suzuki, che sei tanto buona, non piangere! E mi vuoi tanto bene . . . ”*  
*(“You, Suzuki, you're so good, do not cry! And you love me so much . . . ”)*

*“Adieu, Mignon! Courage! Ne pleure pas! Les chagrins sont bien vite oubliés à ton âge; Dieu te consolera! Mes vœux suivront tes pas! Puisses-tu retrouver et famille e patrie! Puisses-tu rencontrer en chemin le bonheur! Je te quitte à regret et mon âme attendrie.”*

*(“Goodbye, Mignon! Courage! Do not cry! Sorrows are indeed quickly forgotten at your age; May God console you! My wishes follow your step! May you be able to see again both family and country! May you be able to meet, on the way, happiness! I leave you with regret and my tender soul shares your pain.”)*

*“Non piangere, Liù se in un lontano giorno io t'ho sorriso per quel sorriso, dolce mia fanciulla m'ascolta: ...Questo...questo,o mia povera Liù, al tuo piccolo cuore che non cade chiede colui che non sorride più.”*

*(“Don't cry, Liù, If in a faraway day I have smiled to you. For that smile, my sweet girl, Listen to me: ....This... this...oh my poor Liù to your little heart that doesn't faint:pray for the one that doesn't smile anymore!”)*

And as Darius sang these tragic, gorgeous notes, the dogs stared at him, transfixed. One by one, they stopped their hysterical barking, and just listened to the music. And when the canines stopped barking, so the alley cats also stopped their yowling--and perhaps what was most fascinating of all, is that not only did the cats stop their ballyhoo, they also stopped being skittish of people. Suddenly, they were no longer alley cats hiding in the dark shadows, but a proud phalanx of felines, of all colors and shapes, spots and stripes.

They sat down and stared at Darius, as did all of the dogs. And they wound around many humans' legs, rubbing and purring.

Darius had saved the best for last. Darius Damian's plan was to put all the dogs and cats into a deep sleep, so that they might have one night's respite from the travails of their homeless and unloved lives. And Darius knew just the song for it: and in a celestial microsecond, during which the gods and angels laughed and wept at the irony ... the silence broke for the opening notes of "Nessun Dorma".

*"Nessun dorma! Nessun dorma! Tu pure, o Principessa Nella tua fredda stanza Guardi le stelle che tremano D'amore e di speranza! Ma il mio mistero è chiuso in me Il nome mio nessun saprà! No, no, sulla tua bocca lo dirò Quando la luce splenderà! Ed il mio bacio scioglierà Il silenzio che ti fa mia! Il nome suo nessun saprà E noi dovrem, ahimè! Morir! Morir! Dilegua, o notte! Tramontate, stelle! Tramontate, stelle! All'alba vincerò! Vincerò! Vincerò!"*

*("None shall sleep, None shall sleep! Even you, oh Princess, In your cold room, watch the stars that tremble with love And with hope. But my secret is hidden within me. My name no one shall know. No... no...On your mouth, I will tell it, when the light shines. And my kiss will dissolve the silence that makes you mine! (No one will know his name and we must, alas, die.) Vanish, o night! Set, stars! Set, stars! At dawn, I will win! I will win! I will win!")*

And after a timeless time-- it might have been ten minutes, it might have been five hours, so caught up were all the humans and creatures in the gorgeosity of Darius Damian's voice--the singing stopped. Darius let the silence swirl around and about all the souls gathered there, on that starry, starry night. And only when the enchanter's voice was still, could you hear the peaceful snores of the dogs. The cats slept as well, but were noiseless. The moon gave its love accordingly.

And then, Darius turned to go back to The Tombs. And here was the magnificent craziness of it all: even though the crowd behind him was neither sleeping nor snoring, they all had been left in a kind of trance. For when Darius Damian began to walk quietly the several blocks leading back to the Tombs, to the party of his mates, the crowd did not follow. They gave him his privacy. They gave him the moment. The throng just stood for several minutes, until they finally dispersed in all directions and quietly made their own ways home\*\*\*. And never no never did the campus police, or the town police for that matter, after all, show up. It was (apparently) just another night of singing, just another naked guy roaming the fringes of the campus barking opera. Yawn.

(\*\*\*It is worth noting that as he walked home in silence, a number of witnesses would swear that the heavens themselves were responding, for falling from the skies in a manner both supernal and ethereal was a to-die-for [this is opera, after all] mezzo soprano voice singing Dido's Lament. And all who heard it, even hirsute males, were said to have burst into tears, although whether the voice ultimately was that of a bone fide angel on high, or just a third floor sorority girl with a good set of pipes, has never been determined.)

It was one of those moments like no other moment in human history. Unless one wanted to wax fanciful, and invoke names like the Pied Piper of Hamelin, or the beautiful Scheherazade, you could say that it was a night without precedent. But, it is worth noting, the Pied Piper and Scheherazade were creatures of fiction. The night I have just described to you really happened.

The Woman Wine was having her last hissy fit.

All of this probably explained why Milton Amsterdam ended the night by laying himself down in the grave he'd dug, “. . .*Ridiculed me, so I hit her, hard*

*enough to send a message. And when she didn't stop. . .”, then he yanked the string hanging down from the dirt hammock, “. . .made of marble, bought it myself on our trip to Rome, so I knew what it could do. . .”, and he gleefully let the ton of dirt clods rain down on him. “. . .Took me to a seedy part of the city, and I was scared but excited. . .down to a basement, a lot of men and a camera, and a cage, and in the cage. . .”*

Within minutes, he had suffocated to death. For what it is worth, after he was dug up, he was found with a peaceful smile on his face. His filthy face, cragged by filthy lucre.

And, as if the death of this geedy, evil, prick with a little prick (the source of much of his bitterness, by the way) was not dramatic enough, it was accompanied by the distant strains of the strangely appropriate poetry that the President was still reciting:

*then let men kill which cannot share,  
let blood and flesh be mud and mire,  
scheming imagine, passion willed,  
freedom a drug that's bought and sold*

*giving to steal and cruel kind,  
a heart to fear, to doubt a mind,  
to differ a disease of same,  
conform the pinnacle of am*

*though dull were all we taste as bright,*

*bitter all utterly things sweet,  
maggoty minus and dumb death  
all we inherit, all bequeath*

And, Dear Reader, as for the “this-worldly” or “other-worldly” music that may or may not have accompanied this poetry and this death, this recitation and accompanying autohumation, I leave that to your pleasantly THC-soaked brains.

#### CHAPTER AFTERWARD

It is worth noting that of course, naturally, hundreds of people uploaded the images of naked Darius Damien, strolling the streets of this small college town, romping in fountains and singing to the creatures of the night.

But it is also worth noting that in this matter as well as others, Woman Wine had a much stronger effect than anyone could have imagined. For as soon as the videos were uploaded to all of those big bad world wide web video viewing sites, the images turned to fuzz. Grey-silver fuzz. Oh, you could still hear Damien’s gorgeous singing. But you could see nothing--not his handsome face, not those dramatic gestures that accompanied his arias, and nary a bit of his nudity. Such is the power of Woman Wine, to carry out the most solemn and sacred desire of all females: that those most important things in life, and of the soul, be kept secret, unseen, and invisible.

CHAPTER TEN:  
THE DARK WEB WINE

*“Do not suppose that abuses are eliminated by destroying the object which is abused. Men can go wrong with wine and women. Shall we then prohibit and abolish women?”*

*--Martin Luther*

*“I imagine hell like this: Italian punctuality, German humour and English wine.”*

*--Peter Ustinov*

Four passionate people were fighting it out on a highly rated roundtable news show. The show was featured on WOLF (World Order Liberation Federation) News. The topic: “DOCTOR ‘FRANKIE-STEIN’ BUYS YOUR SOUL. IS HE SATAN?”

On board for today's panel: names don't matter here. Suffice it to say that we have the charismatic moderator who always gets ratings through the



roof. Next, a woman who has made a national name for herself as an impassioned spokesperson for the radical left. Next, a man who is perhaps the biggest coup for the network, because he possesses both a medical degree and a law degree. And lastly, a good man of the cloth, who is clearly uncomfortable being here, among all these heathens--but, he tells himself, he is answering a higher call.

(It is worth noting that similar roundtables were going on all over the globalnet; it seemed that everybody on the planet had an opinion about this, and half of them had found a slot on the Sunday morning panel shows. Inexplicably, the most recent international champion of the World Wide Federation of Women Wrestlers had even found her way onto a program, along with a man who owned the largest pyramid scheme product company in the world. You no doubt know the one--it features artisanal enemas, scented vitamins, and light bulbs that promise birth control.)

And as soon as the WOLF News program started, they got into it. Oh, did they get into it. Only thing missing from this wrestling match was a huge vat of Jello:

“PEOPLE! Can we just set aside the legalities of it for a minute and talk ethics, because I can see the courts wrangling about this issue for years!”

“Oh, you think this will be resolved in a few years? How about decades?”

“Centuries, maybe. In fact, I don't see how it ever gets resolved. And I am not just talking about the United States, I'm talking about international courts.”

“Which raises the question of does it even matter how our courts rule, because people will just go overseas to do it. Do I have to get into all of the ghastly things that go on overseas, things that any true American would never stand for!”

“What I’d like to get into, people, is the technology. I mean, it has been pretty well established that this technology does indeed exist. I don't think it's a stretch to say that the reason the government wants to make it illegal and create all this legislation, is so that the deep state can control the technology. Isn't it bad enough that the government controls our lives and our money, and invades our privacy-- now the government is going to be the only entity that has the technology to determine what happens to our souls after we die?”

“Point taken, point taken from all of you, all good points. But what I was getting at is, if we set aside the legal issues, let's just look at the ethical. What about the Hippocratic Oath? Doesn't that mean anything anymore?”

“Of course it means something, but I guarantee you, if anybody ever took a close look at the Hippocratic Oath, they’d realize that the medical profession has not embraced it for decades, centuries even. We need to demand--”

“--But the part of the Oath that matters most is ironclad, and it’s the part of the Hippocratic Oath that is the most accepted and morally mandated, ‘First, DO NO HARM.’ And if a person is dead, how can a doctor be doing them harm?”

“How in God's name can you say that he is doing no harm, if he steals their soul?”

“Nobody is stealing anybody’s soul. Dr. Stein is doing this *only* with the permission of the patient. Patients who were going to die anyway, and who were given, in the twelfth hour, an opportunity to provide lavishly for their families, opportunities that they would not have had without Doctor Stein.”

“I cannot believe you're defending him!”

“I'm not defending him, I'm defending the right of every individual to determine what, in fact, happens to their immortal soul.”

“That is exactly why I am appalled! I cannot believe that any good citizen of this country would even entertain the notion that it should be legal,

or that it is even vaguely ethical, to take the soul of a human being and inject it into a vat of alcohol! I'm telling you, I see End Times ahead!”

“Oh Herb, you always see End Times ahead. When the Manson Family Christmas Musical took all those Tonys, you saw End Times. Without the End Times, you’d be out of a job.”

The Sunday morning segment ended with everybody on the panel watching news feed of protests and riots in cities around the world. Tempers were high, nerves frayed. And the mobs were growing ever more violent . . .

. . .Meanwhile, somewhere in a pastoral countryside, Carole was sitting across from Frankie. She clicked off the image of the bickering roundtable on her computer screen. She had wanted to get Frankie’s reaction to the passionate debate.

There was a nip in the air, and a fire roaring in the fireplace--a fireplace big enough for two people to stand in. Ironically, Frankie had opened a bottle of wine. Carole made sure to read the label. It was a pricey but well known brand. And Frankie would never have tricked her into drinking ‘Woman Wine’ by switching labels, that just wasn't his style. Somehow, she knew this. Yet it all seemed like part of an elaborate mind game to Carole. And so, as more of a power play than anything else, she took a long sip. To show that she trusted him? Or to show that she wasn’t afraid?

“You speak of the outrage, doctor. Of masses of women protesting in the streets, in cities all around the world. And you speak of the politicians, up in arms, taking on the clarion call of the people. You've talked about the fury of religious leaders across the globe, of the viral tweets and memes. But you seem to be shying away from what was going on at that same time. The deeper, darker reality of this ‘Frankensteinian’ technology you developed.”

"I should get angry at you again for that. I should walk out on you for that. But . . .I realize that you are just doing your job. 'Frankenstein-ian.' Carole, I thought that you were better than a cheap shot like that. But back to your point. You're talking about the Dark Web. Of course it was inevitable that the Dark Web would get involved. But that's not my fault, Carole. Any more than any of this is my fault. The technology would have been discovered sooner or later, by somebody else, and probably by someone without my ethical code. Look, the Dark Web gets in on everything. Crimes as old as humankind have gone high-tech, and why? Because they can. And that's the only reason they need, in order to exist. In order to feed the greed. In order to make money off of the suffering of others. Carole, look around you. Does it look like I need money? Of course it's a nightmare. But evil has always been among us. And the fight against it goes on. I support that fight. I'm part of that fight."

"Fair enough. But, to particulars. Frankie, what exactly do you know about the Dark Web version of 'Woman Wine'?"

"Well, it immediately became apparent to a lot of nasty people that there was a great deal of money to be made in this. You could even compare it to, well, not just human trafficking, but also the threatened extinction of a species like the rhinoceros, because some people believe that the rhinoceros horn cures cancer, or renews erections, and so they sell the horns for thirty-thousand dollars on the black market, on the Dark Web, and the tragic result is that it looks like we're going to wipe out the species. What I'm saying is that the corruption of technology goes hand in hand with the unveiling of any new technology. But to answer your question. Look, as I've explained, I did it ethically. Honestly. I told you about how I didn't pull any punches; I didn't suggest to anybody that they were donating their organs to science after they died--"

"Yes, to cover your ass legally, is what you told me--"

"Partly, yes, I admit that much. But I also did it for my own personal ethical reasons. You know, at the end of the day, I have to look at myself in the mirror. Look, I knew the technology was going to come out sooner or later, and I knew that my project would be discovered. So why lie about it from the get-go? I only kept it sub rosa in the beginning because I didn't want to deal with the chaos that would obviously ensue. Not in the beginning, at least. And now I'm ready for it, and now that's why you're here."

"But back to the Dark Web."

"Yes. Back to the Dark Web. It didn't take long for them to figure out that there was a huge amount of money in this. But the problem was willing donors. Damn difficult conundrum. Let's look at it in terms of percentages. First, let's start with the not-so-obvious. More than eight out of ten people on this planet identify with some kind of seriously dogmatic religion, and so it logically follows that they're probably not going to be up for donating their souls to be injected into a vat of vino. So that makes most of the planet ineligible. Secondly, let's go for a more obvious point. Whatever percentage of the population is left after you remove all the religious people, you've got to cut that in half, because we are talking about the soul of a woman, of course, so that eliminates all the men. Also, you've got to figure that, whatever number of people that leaves, you've got to subtract twenty percent of that, because twenty percent of that would be children, and that's not acceptable. That is ghastly beyond words. And last but certainly not least, you need somebody whose death is imminent. And that whittles down your population sample to almost nothing. What does that leave us with? Very slim pickins."

"Unless, of course, a person is willing to abduct women to make a fortune in the black market."

"Yes, Carole, and that's where the madness ensues. Because we're talking about the disposition of the soul. And it turns out that women who go

to their deaths under duress, well, for lack of a better way to say it, don't make very good wine. It's just that simple.”

Carole nodded grimly. She had sources confirming this.

“Yes, that's what Banksy was discovering, when he infiltrated the meetings, or perhaps I should say the wine tastings, set up through chat rooms on the Dark Web. I couldn't believe it when his notes were mailed to me--anonymously.”

"Oh yes, Banksy, shredder of allegedly great art,” quipped Frankie, refilling both of their glasses. “Got disillusioned with the art world and turned to investigative journalism, if only as a new source of inspiration for a new kind of art. Died far too soon. I've seen his notes too.”

“Yes, you've seen his notes, Frankie, a number of us have. But do you have any experience with, exposure to. . . these ‘wine tastings’ on the Dark Web?”

"Okay, I'll bite. I do have friends at the Bureau. But you must know that to protect myself and my sources--just as you would protect yours--I can't answer that fully. And I have given you my word that I did not participate in anything illegal, cruel, or otherwise untoward. That said, I can tell you this. Banksy was right, those wine tastings really went on, and they were very desired. Prestigious. Sought after. Tickets sold for amounts you cannot imagine. One particularly creepy little Asian man was bizarrely, inordinately proud of his solid gold tastevin that he would wear around his neck, just as proud and unashamed as if he was attending a big event in Paris or Sonoma. Very weird.”

And so We, the Watchers, are voyeurs of the Dark Web, riding the Dragon Tor into a level of hell that we did not want to imagine, yet cannot turn away from . . .as Frankie continues his recounting:

“Here is what I can tell you, my dear Carole. Imagine this if you will . . . a dimly lit room. A gathering of men, wealthy beyond the wildest dreams of the ninety-nine percent, clothed in raiment of every kind of imagining. Native garb from countries, exotic and banal, spanning the globe. Suits, and casual dress. Men wearing boots made from God knows what kind of endangered species. Men in turbans and caftans and kimonos, thawb and cheongsam and sherwani--and clothing that even National Geographic doesn't know the word for. It was like some United Nations from hell, that's what it looked like. Finally, the time came: a shadowy figure produced a bottle, and spoke for a few moments about its sensuously sordid 'circumstances', its 'origin', shall we say, rhapsodizing about it in much the same way that the way that more traditional aficionados like to describe the origins and nuances of a bottle of wine: effusive, pretentious, adoring, absurd, arrogant, precious--and always, *always* using the beverage to lubricate one's desired brush with immortality. With the all-knowing. Then, a small amount would be poured into everybody's glass. They would sip. And that's when it really got crazy. Most of the time, most of the men would spit it out. They would make faces and utter epithets, and just spit it out. Because the wine would be horrible. It was nothing like my first vat of wine from that sweet, darling Ariel. And what they figured out, what they deduced, was that the women whose souls were used for the wine had died such ghastly deaths, and suffered so much before they died, that it just ruined the wine. All other possible factors were eliminated: length of time that the wine was allowed to cure, what it was cured in. The nature of the grape. There was no other explanation: this tortured taste had to come from the way the woman in question was treated.”

Back in the castle, the flames in the fireplace seemed to be generating demonic shapes--or so it seemed to Carole's overactive imagination. Carole was staring at Frankie. She had heard ten thousand sordid stories in her

career, but this one got under her skin, and polluted her psyche. Carole looked to Frankie as though she was going to be sick. But she said nothing. Instead of sipping the wine that Frankie had put out for her, she pulled a water bottle from her purse and took a long draw from it.

"That is all so disgusting. Horrible."

"Most things on the Dark Web are, Carole."

"Yes. Yes they are . . ." said Carole, and then she remembered herself. She sat up in her chair and returned to a more journalistic tone: "On a lighter note, I understand that there is a small group of scientists who figured out that you could get kind of the same effect, a similar product--you know, 'Woman Wine'-- by taking part of a woman's DNA, and infusing the wine with that. And producing a vintage based on that."

"You have to give them credit for trying," said Frankie, chuckling. "If that DNA thing had worked, it certainly would have gone a long way to diffuse the public outcry. I mean, some of the arch feminists and religious zealots would always be screeching about something, but yes, if DNA had worked, it surely would have been the answer."

"And so what happened with that?"

"As it happens, I was actually there for that wine tasting. They had followed an excellent protocol, I have to give them credit for that. They were fastidious, they were thorough, using all of the best upgrades and sparing absolutely no expense. And they were patient, they let it age. They didn't want that to be a wild card."

"And?"

And suddenly, we are no longer in Frankie's castle, we are Watchers in a room, another laboratory. There is a celebratory atmosphere, a sense of eager anticipation, as a group of men, all strangely bespectacled, watch the wine being poured into the glasses. They all sip it once. An assortment of



unpleasant expressions play across their faces. There is a silence, as they twirl the liquid in their mouths and try to figure it out, struggling to place their thoughts . . .*what they know this to be*. Sense-memory kicks in. Finally, one of them speaks.

“Boxed wine?”

And then, all of the other scientists nod in agreement.

"Stanley is right. Box wine."

“Franzia, ya think?”

“I say Vella.”

“Our Daily Red?”

“No. Definitely Carlo Rossi in a carton.”

They all nod. It has been a sad night for them.

And just like that, we are back in the castle. Carole was studying Frank.

“You're telling me that the DNA of a woman tastes like bad box wine?”

Frankie said nothing, but merely shrugged and nodded silently. Carole pressed on.

"And, of course, in the spirit of still trying to lighten things up, I've got a couple of tips that tell me that some scientists, or should we say some vintners, decided to make wine infused with the soul of a man--"

Before she could finish her question, Frankie howled with laughter. It was infectious, and Carole could not help but laugh along with him. Through her snorts of laughter, she struggled to ask her question.

"Was it really that bad? ‘Man Wine’?”

And again, we are no longer in the castle. We are in a brightly-lit laboratory. A group of scientists, a mix of men and women, are having their own wine tasting. They all sip it, and then spit it out at the same time. But

then, after a ripple of muttering and cussing within the group, one man stands up. It is clear from the look on his face that he has had some sort of epiphany.

"NO! I mean, yes, it's horrible . . . but that's because *this is wine*. We made a batch of wine. What were we thinking? We were dealing with a dead dude. We should have taken his soul and brewed it into a batch of beer."

Suddenly the room has come alive again, and everybody talks at once. Yes! Howard is a genius!

"We use the soul to aerate the wort, am I right?"

Applause all around.

And just like that, we are back at the castle. Carole cannot help but grin at this curious twist in the story.

"So, those rumors that we've heard are true, these top-secret efforts going on at these upstart microbreweries, where they're going to produce beer infused with a soul of a man? I can't even say that with a straight face."

"It's true, my dear. It's true."

The two of them linger for a moment on a laughter they know cannot last. Carole becomes deadly serious again.

"But the rumors, Frankie. It's pretty much common knowledge that there is Woman Wine, for lack of a better phrase, coming out of the Dark Web. It is being sold for astronomical amounts, and it is supposed to be really, astonishingly good. Now, these batches of wine cannot all be coming from women who are selling their souls--wow, I never thought of it this way, literally selling their souls to the highest bidder. It can't be that, can it?"

"It's bound to come out sooner or later. So, since you want the whole story, Carole, I'll tell you what I know. After some very grim experimenting, these producers of wine on the Dark Web, they have learned that . . . an abducted woman, a terrified woman, a tortured woman, they all make for a lousy batch of wine. But it is possible to, how shall I say this, to send the

woman on a very pleasant trip. A drug-induced trip. We have better mood enhancers and hallucinogenic drugs than ever in the history of humankind. And from what I hear--because you know, Carole, I told you earlier that I am working with the feds myself--from what I hear, a woman is obviously terrified when she's been abducted, when she fears that her kidnapper may take her life.

*But* if you give her the right drugs, and then put her in the right environment, she just, sort of, forgets what has happened, and where she is, and, well, she just goes on a great drug trip. And then, if her life is terminated while she's experiencing this, her soul turns to its former self. Predictably. Replicatably. Beautifully. The soul returns to its essence, to the soul that it was before the horror enveloped it. Whatever there was about the woman that was happy and confident, playful and imaginative, kind and idealistic, the drug trip brings out all of this in her.

And then, tragically, her life is snuffed out, her soul is captured, and it then turns into what I understand is an exquisite batch of wine. I see the look on your face, Carole, and I am so sorry to tell you this, but you wanted the story. The whole truth. For what it's worth, Carole, my contacts, law enforcement in the highest echelons, are tracing the tracks of some of the illegal drugs, particularly hallucinogens, and then that, in turn, becomes a way to crack these horrible vintner rings.”

"Well, Frankie, thank you for that. But we both know that there will always be predators out there. Willing to supply this new market.”

Frankie did not respond. For a long time, neither of them said anything. They just sat and drank their wine.

CHAPTER ELEVEN:  
LADY OF THE FLOWERS

*“In vino veritas.”*

*--Pliny the Elder*

*“Drink wine. This is life eternal. This is all that youth will give you. It is the season for wine, roses and drunken friends. Be happy for this moment. This moment is your life.”*

*— Omar Khayyam, رباعيات خيام -*

It was, appropriately enough, just around midnight when they decided to call it a night. After dinner, he had given her a tour of his wine cellar. It was the only part of the day she would have described as “underwhelming”; there were some pricey bottles and some old bottles, nothing more. That first, magical bottle of Woman Wine--a few bottles of that vintage, actually--had been imbibed by the Bonesmen, and the rest were hidden away at the vineyard he had purchased, just twenty miles away in a sleepy country community. And Frankie had been cryptic when Carole had asked him about any future candidates.

Throughout that long evening, Carole had asked more and more questions. Frankie, just as relentless, had eloquently defended himself and the whole wizardish business. “Techno-magic”, he had even called it once, when the wine was hitting him hard. And alchemy, he loved that word. Frankie waxed on, lavishly praising the process of capturing and containing a human soul, pushing Carole to see all the wild possibilities in the future, as human technology advanced to virtually unimaginable realms: what if, for example, the soul could be infused into a new body, or AI--something along those same lines that Gates and Hawking had offered up to the collective human imagination--downloading the entirety of the workings of the human mind into a shiny, new, this-year’s-model machine. A chance for immortality, perhaps?

But finally, at last, Carole and Frankie were both yawning their way through the conversation. He walked her from the house, then leisurely across the grand topiary gardens.

The two of them stood in the moonlight, next to the fountain. Carole had never been so sure in her life that she was going to be kissed, and even in that moment, she was not sure how she was going to play it. She had known of Dr. Frankie Stein (what a ridiculous name, who could possibly be attracted to a man with a name like that?) most of her adult life. And she had never really liked him. Not that she had ever met him. It was more what she knew of him, that was somehow off-putting.

She'd never warmed to what she knew of him. There was something not quite right about him. But today, he had startled her. He was more charming than she thought he would be. And wise, and philosophical, and funny.

His day of words had even made her rethink her initial revulsion to the idea of “Woman Wine”.

She took a step closer to him.

“Tell me again, Dr. Stein, why I'm sleeping in the slave quarters, instead of one of the grand suites in the castle?”

“They're known as servants' quarters, but you're probably right about the slave part. The history on that is a little murky. It reminds one of the scandal about Sally Hemings and our third president, and a certain secret passageway to a hidden room. . . But, to answer your question, the reason you're sleeping in the servants' quarters is because that is where most of the hauntings take place, and one of the first things you ever told me is that you wanted to know, as a sort of sidebar to your big story, the answer to the nagging question, the delicious legend: ‘is Shadowstone Castle really haunted?’ And you expressed a definite interest in seeing ghosts. Well, tonight, you will most certainly see wandering spirits.”

Then he kissed her hand, and abruptly walked back to the castle. She stared after him, baffled.

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Later, in the cozy bedroom, Carole reclined in the darkness, the light from the moon trickling through the window and playing on her skin. Her eyes were wide open. She was getting that little tickle in her solar plexus, the one that told her something was very, very off. It was a reporter's instincts. There was no sound in the room. There was no sound outside. She made herself stay perfectly still, as though she thought that by respecting the perfect silence, it might give her the answers.

And so it did. Suddenly she opened her eyes wide.

“He would never keep it in the same cellar! He would have a different cellar, two different cellars! That's exactly how his brain works.”

She sat bolt upright in bed.

"How did I not see this before? He practically told me. All that stuff about secret passageways and Sally Hemings and their hidden room for secret meetings--"

She stopped, and caught her breath quickly, the picture coming together in her mind.

"It's why he wanted me to sleep here, and not in one of the grand bedrooms. It would amuse his evil genius to no end. Hell, I bet he's getting off up there in that big mausoleum, just thinking about this."

She shot out of bed and began pacing, her movements coaxing thoughts.

"I'm sleeping right above it. I just know it!"

Carole began crawling around the wood floor on her hands and knees, and as she did, she realized that this act of hers would have pleased him to no end. Her subservience. Her grovelling. Carole took her loafer and began tapping the heel against the wooden floor. Muffled. Muffled. Muffled. Still crawling, she widened her circumference. Muffled. Muffled. Then, she did what she should have done in the first place, she told herself--she'd seen it in a hundred movies. She moved the throw rug, and continued tapping with the heel of her shoe. Muffled. Muffled. Hollow.

Pay dirt.

Her face, screwed up in concentration, suddenly burst into smiles. Up till now, she had only been working by the light of the moon. She jumped to her feet and went to turn on the lights--but then froze, thinking better of it.

"He'll be watching. He may be watching right now, to see if I'm doing precisely this. To see if I'm figuring it out."

And then, on instinct, she went to the front door of the slave quarters to see if it had a lock. It did. She locked the front door.

"As if that could keep him out," she chuckled wryly to herself, suddenly flooded with a sense of dark foreboding. Then she hurried back to the spot on

the floor where the tap of the shoe had rung hollow. She grabbed her cell phone and turned on the flashlight, focusing its narrow beam on the floor. She spotted it: the trapdoor. Suddenly her cell phone battery died.

Carole stood in complete darkness, cut only by the trickling light of the moon through the window. And then, Carole remembered that she had seen a candle in a silver candlestick, sitting on top of the bookshelf, in the adjoining room. She made her way to the bookshelf in the dark, and counted herself lucky when she could feel a book of matches behind the candlestick.

Carole was wearing only her funny gunny sack of a nightgown. (It had actually been her mother's nightgown, never worn--her mother had always said that it was "too nice to wear". That thought alone had sent Carole into gales of laughter and tears, when she had come home from the funeral, started going through her mother's things, and found the lovely nightdress untouched, still in the silk bag they had given her at the Buckingham Palace Gift Shop, where Carole had bought it so very long ago. When she left her mother's house for the last time, Carole had appropriated it, and worn it as her own ever since.)

Carole pulled on her slippers, and lifted the trapdoor. She took a deep breath and carefully began making her way down the stairs, holding the candle precariously with one hand. When she felt one foot touch the floor of the hidden room below hers, she put her other foot down on the floor, steadied herself, and let go of the trapdoor ladder. Her feet firmly on the ground again, she held the candle out to get a look around, feeling more confident now. Her instincts had been correct.

It appeared to her that she was not standing in a room, but a kind of corridor. She saw a wooden door with black wrought iron embellishments on it. She walked towards it, carefully finding her footing in the flickering candle light. She put her hand on the cold metal handle and gave it a pull. She stepped inside the room. And then, Carole saw what she knew she would see:



A wine cellar.

And this wine cellar, while smaller than the one Frankie had shown her earlier that day, was somehow more grand. The wine racks were exquisitely embellished, and there was a single chair to sit in. It was a plush leather chair, with the skin supple and broken in, inviting one to sit down. Beside the chair was a small table. Just large enough for a bottle of wine, and a glass.

Carole held the candle up, saw what was hanging on the walls of the wine cellar, and caught her breath. It was a long row of pictures of women. Each woman was more beautiful than the next. Most of them were younger than springtime, but there were a couple of old, graceful, dignified faces whose wisdom and kindness shown through the years, and sparkled through the framed picture glass. It was strange, Carole observed: the photographs had all been taken and developed and altered so that they looked like they might have been pictures taken a hundred years ago.

Below the row of faces on the gray stone wall, were the racks of bottles. *The* bottles. Even before Carole reached for one to look at the label, she could see a bit of the art, and it looked as though the labels all featured the photographs of the women.

And then, for a fleeting moment, Carole had a horrible thought. The most horrific thought of her life. Would she find a picture of her sister in here?

She held the candle high in front of her, and moved it slowly to the left, and the right, looking carefully at every picture on the wall. Carole breathed a sigh of relief. Her sister was not here.

Then she chuckled to herself. Of course her sister's picture was not here among them. Frankie may have been eccentric. But he had never struck her as evil. And besides, she told herself, there was no reason to believe that any of these women's souls had been acquired in any kind of cruel or criminal way. They had just been. . . legitimate volunteers. Surely. And you kept these bottles

of wine in a separate cellar, Frankie, and did not show them to me during your proud tour earlier today, because--

She did not know how to finish that thought. She took a few steps deeper into the room, ready to begin examining the bottles of wine. And then, listening to some prescient voice in her head, she turned around, and looked behind her. There it was. On the wall. Not a picture of her sister, but a large medallion of Saint Albert Magnus. Carole caught her breath quickly, and for a moment, she thought she was going to faint. The medallion was huge, about three feet in circumference, made from some kind of large pressed silver plate.

And it looked exactly like a big version of the tiny charm that she had found in her sister's hands. The one thing that her sister had been clutching, when she found her sister's dead body.

Carole put her hand to her chest, trying to catch a breath, when out of the corner of her eye, she caught a glint of light. She turned, trembling. It was the handle of another door at the far end of the cellar that had caught her eye. And for some reason, in the middle of all this wrought iron; it was a kind of a crystal door knob. Odd, she thought.

She walked towards it carefully, not wanting to lose her footing in the darkness, then stopped in front of the door. She did not have to go through it. She knew what she would find. But she did have to go through it. Because she knew what she would find. The door creaked when she pulled it open. She stepped into the room, raised the candle up high again, and gasped.

One picture. There was just one picture. And it was, as she knew it would be, of her sister. Carole stop breathing. She had never seen this picture of her sister before, and yet it was strangely familiar. She stepped closer, to take a closer look. It seemed to be one of her sister's headshots from her early acting days, but again, like all the rest of the pictures in the other room, it had been transformed, to suit the diabolical tastes of the doctor.

In the photograph, her sister's usually perfect hair was looser and freer than she usually liked it to be. Its ironed perfection was gone, and curls frizzed around her face in playful tendrils. Her features were delicate, and her face looked younger than springtime. And then, Carole realized what the picture resembled. It looked exactly like a picture you would see of a silent movie star. Mary Pickford, or Clara Bow, or Lillian Gish.

Or, thought Carole to herself, *my sister*. The framed photograph was rendered all in sepia, colorized in strategic places. The azure blue eyes, the dark pink lips. And perhaps, most diabolical of all, the flowers that she held up to her face, as though she was inhaling the beautiful fragrance.

As she studied the flowers in the photograph, Carole suddenly became aware of what was hidden in the dark shadows all around her. More flowers. Vases of flowers. There must have been a dozen of them. And they were all put here very recently. They were all perfectly fresh. The bouquets were composed of every variety of flower, every crazy kind of combination, which is exactly how Carole's sister had always liked it.

Carole struggled to contain herself. She fought with herself not to scream or faint. She spoke quickly under her breath, terrified that the mad scientist, wherever he was lurking, would hear her if she spoke too loud.

"I owe it to my sister keep it together. I've got to keep it together. . ."

Carole took a step back from the picture and looked all around her. She stared at the wine racks. But whereas in the previous room, there had been dozens of bottles of wine, hundreds--here there was only one single bottle. What did she read somewhere in preparation for this interview, that a barrel of wine would produce some three hundred bottles? Where were all the rest of the bottles? From her sister's. . . vintage. Surely Frankie could not have already consumed them all. That did not seem his style, even in this moment when he seemed to Carole to be the very incarnation of evil. Very gingerly, as

though if in breaking the bottle, she would destroy her sister's soul, Carole pulled the bottle out from the rack.

There it was. Her sister's picture on the label. . . the same picture that was on the wall, and below that, the words "La Femme De La Fleur."

"The Lady of the Flowers. . ." Carole whispered.

As if on cue, the candle blew out. Carole swore as she fumbled in her pockets, realizing that the matches had fallen out somewhere along the way. Gingerly, she put the bottle of wine back exactly where it had been, and cautiously retraced her steps. When she got to the rickety wooden stairs, the moonlight was trickling down through the trapdoor, helping her make her way back up into the bedroom.

Carole stood at the window, staring out at the grounds. What clearly had to be the ghosts of the slaves, servants, and other people who had once lived in this castle, victims of its dark secrets, were roaming the gardens. But Carole was in such shock over what she had seen in the secret cellar, that these phantoms had no effect on her.

Ghosts. They were just ghosts. She had always believed in ghosts, and there were some right in front of her. It all seemed so anticlimactic now, in light of everything she had just learned.

But she could not think about that. She needed to get the hell away from Shadowstone Castle. And Frankie. Who knew what his plans were for her? She began to pack, quickly throwing things into her overnight bag.

CHAPTER TWELVE:  
THE HARVEST

*“Like some wines, our love could neither mature nor travel.”*

— *Graham Greene*

*“Either give me more wine or leave me alone.”*

— *Rumi*

Carole could not possibly begin to suspect that far across the garden, up in one of the turrets of the castle, Frankie was savoring what he had recorded, playing the images over and over again: Carole opening the secret door, staring at the photograph of her sister, and examining the bottle of *her* wine. The turret was very dimly lit, and anybody sneaking a look at Frankie would not have been able to tell whether his face was smiling, or somber, as he watched his darling discover the truth.

Frankie was sitting at his desk, a stunning Francesco Molon piece, the Inlaid Presidential Executive Desk model, done in a lovely Tuscan Earth stained wood, with marquetry to die for. Perhaps, some had. The shade of stain was perfect. Why would he go with a color like Saffron, or Nectar, or Indigo— or for

that matter, Miami or Mahogany or any of the Walnuts--when the man behind the beauty, Francesco Molon, was an Italian? The goddam genius-artist had been born in Italy! And all that that implied. The Tuscan Earth stain was divine, and Frankie had fallen into a comfortable understanding with his maid that she was to make his cafe-au-lait so that it matched the color of the desk exactly. If she did precisely that, he could be assured that it would be a perfect cup of coffee. Just as the desk was perfect.

(Well, truth be told, if he were to bare his soul, it was not the perfect desk. The desk had cost \$65,000 and change, so of course he had to think twice about buying it. He had wanted to pay much more. For a different desk. And so sometimes, in retrospect, he thought that the impulse buy of this cheaper desk was a mistake. He should have held out, and waited until they made another desk in the style he really coveted, although that would have taken months, or maybe a couple of years. He should have held out for the more expensive one, the \$113,000 one. That was the only regret he ever had about the desk.) But what he loved most about this desk is that it looked exactly like the one that his good friend, a fellow Bonesman, had in his office, the Oval Office. They did so like to spar this way.

Frankie glanced out the window and saw Carole heading towards her car, suitcase in hand. The full moon lit up the garden. Her car. Her face.

Frankie ran down the stairs, out the front door, and was by her side in an instant. Carole was startled and frightened, but tried to put up a brave front. Frankie smiled largely, almost stupidly, trying to pretend that he did not know that she knew everything. He reached out and touched her arm.

“What's all this, Carole dear, are you leaving?”

“Yes. I have everything I need,” she spat out, yanking her arm away.

“And I mean everything. The interview is over.”

She had her keys in her hand and was opening the car door.

“Carole, my dear, did I say something to offend?”

She was already in the driver's seat and starting the ignition.

“Did you say something to offend? That's rich!”

And then, on second thought--perhaps because she wanted to be right in his face, and look directly into his eyes--she turned off the ignition, got out of the car, and stared straight at him. Her passion had completely overwhelmed any plans she might have had to remain secretive about what she had discovered in the subterranean shadows below the slave quarters.

“Look, you bastard, I don't know if my sister killed herself because she really wanted to kill herself; she's always struggled with depression. Or maybe you egged her on. That's what I think. I think you egged her on because you wanted--well, we both know what you wanted. But I do know this: whether she did it on her own, or you encouraged her, *you were there, damn you, you were there!* And you could have stopped her! You could have called me. You could have--AGHHH! Now I know what the medallion she was holding meant. Frankie, I saw the medallion. I saw the cellar. And the bald truth is, I don't know for a fact that you've done anything illegal. That is to say, I can't prove it. Yet. But as God is my witness, I will, Frankie. I will. And for what it's worth, ‘Doctor Stein’, you know far too much about the Woman Wine goings-on in the Dark Web. . . and you tell the story with far too much detail. . . and you enjoy recounting the events far too much. . . and you tell your tale with far too much gusto--*for you to not be involved.* All those creepy stories you told me? I know you're behind them. I can feel it. I can see it, just as surely as I saw the ghosts in the garden under the goddam full moon. I know what I know. I will take you down, if it's the last thing I do. And that's a promise.”

She stared at him, surprised that he had no response. He was unfazed. It was as though she'd asked him to drop her gloves in the mail if he found them. After a moment, he smiled broadly and said, “You do like me then, just a little.”

Her mouth dropped open. She stammered a moment before blurting out, "Are you *insane*? Did you not hear *anything* I just said?"

"Oh, I heard what you said. And that's how I know that you do care for me. Or at least, you trust me. And that really is the start of a beautiful friendship, isn't it? You see, you are one of the smartest women I have ever met. And I have met a lot of smart women. You never would have let me know what you found, if you thought that revealing it to me would have put you in danger. You know that I could never hurt you, Carole. And I love that you know that."

"God, you are one weird psychopath!" Carole shrieked, then she got back into her car, and drove away from his ghastly castle as fast as she could.

He watched her drive away, his smile fading. He turned to go back inside.

When he got back to his desk, he sat down and poured himself a glass of cognac. Louis XIII De Remy Martin Cognac, to be specific. One did not always need to drink wine. He sipped it a moment, admiring the crystal decanter.

Frankie sighed deeply. Oh well. No point in putting it off. He knew what he had to do. He picked up his phone and dialed a number.

"Look, I've changed my mind. Take her. Bring her." And then, before hanging up, he added, "Oh, and do record the whole thing for me. Just because it's come to this, doesn't mean I can't have some memories of her. . ."

Frankie then hung up the phone and stared at the pair of gloves that she had indeed, left behind. He fingered the softness of the expensive leather.

"I am so sorry, dear. But clearly, it's either you, or me. And Carole, I always win."

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When Carole got home, she could hear the high-pitched yipping from the other side of the door as she fumbled with her keys. She stepped inside, and a glorious smile splashed across her face, such a smile as she had not smiled in the last two days.

He was waiting for her. He was wonderful. He was her sunshine. He was a thirteen week old English Bulldog puppy.

“Winston!” She effused, scooping him up in her arms. “I missed you so very much, you funny little British banger, you fat cuddly thing! Only you wouldn't have liked it there. It was a creepy place. But mommy's home now.”

He licked her face mercilessly.

“Did Auntie Joan take good care of you?” Carole picked up a box of puppy size milk bones from the counter. “Well, I see she did.”

She switched on the lights and saw to her chagrin that her beautiful pair of aqua leather high heels had been chewed to oblivion. But Carole did not get particularly upset. She couldn't. With this puppy, it was impossible. Every day when she left the house, she gave it her best effort. She put things out of reach, and always made sure that her shoes were tucked away in their boxes high on a shelf. But Winston always managed to find something. And, at the end of the day, literally at the end of the day, she didn't care. She just wanted Winston, and a glass of wine. In this case, maybe a bottle of wine, she thought to herself, as she snuggled him close and gave him a kiss.

“And this, my friend, is why I always buy imposter designer shoes.”

Ten minutes later, Carole was standing on her balcony, dressed in her mother's nightgown. She looked like a Kewpie doll-styled screen siren from an old silent movie. She was holding the glass of wine that she had been so anticipating. On the small table behind her was a half empty bottle of wine.

But Winston was not relaxing, he was jumping up and down at her feet.

“Oh dear. You need one last constitutional before bed, don’t you?”

She picked him up, all six pounds of him, and looked into his eyes.

“It’s even better this way,” she said. Then she threw her coat on over her nightgown and headed down the rear stairs of the building to the garden nearby.

And now, Dear Readers, our perspective shifts, and we see it through the grainier vantage point of a camera that has been mounted onto a dark corner of the building:

As Carole makes her way down the alley, a van screeches out of the shadows, the door opens, and a shadowy figure whisks her inside. A gloved hand clamps over her mouth before she can scream. The van drives away, leaving the puppy all alone in the black night. It barks and cries, dragging its leash. But Carole is gone.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN:  
THE WINE'S REVENGE

*“The wine—it made her limbs loose and liquid, made her feel that a hummingbird had taken the place of her heart.”*

*—Jodi Picoult*

*“One should always be drunk. That's all that matters. . . But with what? With wine, with poetry, or with virtue, as you chose. But get drunk.”*

*-Charles Baudelaire*

Frankie sat at his desk and did something he very rarely did. He tried to understand what it was that he was feeling. He struggled to analyze it. Because he very rarely did this, he was not very good at it. He had never really seen the point. Never grasped the benefit.

“Murder to dissect,” he murmured to himself. It was only when his sound system shuffled its way to one of the algorithm’s favorite pieces, that Frankie suddenly understood. The piece was ‘Adagio for Strings’ by Samuel

Barber. And the understanding was that Frankie was sad. Frankie suddenly understood that he was sad. He was not a man given to remorse; he was not a man given to depression or the blues or anything of that ilk.

But this was Carole. And the thought of what was going to happen to her made him heartsick.

But there was no way around it. She said she was going to take him down, and take him down she would, by God. She was good, she was the best, she was intrepid, she was the award-winning this and that. She was going to be his undoing. She would get the goods that would send him to jail for the rest of his life. And not one of those country club prisons, no, it would be the one in the middle of nowhere, where bombers and serial killers and madmen went.

She was his Moriarty. She was going to be his next vat of wine.

The phone rang. He picked it up and listened for a moment.

“I’ll be right there,” was all Frankie said in reply. And then Frankie hurried down the stairs, retrieved his black bag from the closet in his study, and headed out the door.

A half an hour later he found himself driving down a winding lane that took him onto the vineyard grounds. He parked outside of the processing barn, grabbed his black bag, and got out. He sighed heavily as he stared at the barn in the moonlight. It was rustic, gothic, even. It looked like a still from a movie poster. He went inside.

There she was. She was laid out on a table, unconscious. She was wearing that beautiful lace ecru Victorian nightgown that he had fallen in love with, on that night that he had watched her discover his deepest and darkest secrets.

“Ophelia ...” Frankie muttered to himself.

“What?” came a voice from the depths of the barn. Someone stepped out of the shadows and approached Frankie. It was the Hired Man. The two men shook hands.

“This is. . . uh. . . a bit strange for me,” said Frankie, stammering awkwardly. “It just. . . we’ve never met, of course, and that's for a reason. I rather prize my anonymity.”

“Well, if two men involved in the business of murder can’t trust each other, then who can?”

“Point taken,” said Frankie, smirking at the Hired Man's dry humor. And then, Frankie fumbled at explaining. “It's just that, for a number of reasons, I didn't want you just leaving her somewhere. I didn't want to hand her off. . .”

“Hey, I get it. So was the video satisfactory? Did I capture everything you wanted? No pun intended.”

“It was fine.”

Frankie approached Carole, and smiled sadly at how very pretty she looked. Frankie gently picked up her wrist and felt her pulse.

“She could wake up in a few minutes and be just fine. Maybe just a little headache.”

Frankie was saying this to himself more than anybody else, and the Hired Man gave him his space. After a moment, he spoke.

“Look, doctor, would you like me to do the honors? I get the feeling that this all makes you rather queasy.”

“Yes, perhaps that's best.”

Frankie was surprised at his own squeamishness. He opened the bag and got out a hypodermic. He handed it to the Hired Man, and stepped back. Frankie watched out of the corner of his eye as the Hired Man injected Carole. Frankie's heart was racing; this seemed to be taking forever. When the syringe was finally empty, the Hired Man pulled it out again, then looked at Frankie.

“Shall I dispose of this for you, doctor?”

Frankie felt heartsick. Suddenly he headed for the door.

“I'm going to go outside just for a minute and get some air.”

Frankie stumbled out into the moonlight. For a moment, he thought he really was going to be sick. But he couldn't buckle now, he could not be weak. He had to see this through. He took a deep breath and went back inside.

He had plenty of time, he thought to himself, Carole should have another five or ten minutes. Frankie chuckled strangely to himself at his own sentimentality. He could have arranged for it to be instantaneous, but he knew that would have hurt her more. This way was gentler. Like falling into a beautiful dream, and going to sleep.

He walked over to a closet, got a key from his pocket and opened the closet door. He pulled out a machine. *The machine.* The machine that would capture her soul. It both thrilled and saddened him, the thought of this actually coming to pass: to capture something as elusive as the soul of Carole Campbell. He wheeled the machine to the side of the table and checked her pulse. Weakening, but definitely still there, he thought to himself. He turned his attention towards the machine, hoping it would distract him from the revulsion he felt over what it was that he had done. And that which he was about to do.

Finally, as he had so many times before, he flipped switches, he turned knobs. Once again, he picked up her wrist and felt her pulse. It was gone. Even though he felt a jab of pain, he had to admit that he also felt a surge of enthusiasm. A primal lust--the hunt almost complete, capture imminent.

Frankie turned his attention to the screen. He was surprised at what he saw, or perhaps, more accurately, *at what he did not see.*

There was nothing on the screen.

“What in the hell--?”

“What is it, doctor?”

“I don't understand, there's no activity on the monitor,” Frankie said, staring at the screen and fiddling with the knobs and switches. “She's not-- that is, I see no soul. How can-- *She's got no soul?*”

“Of course I do,” said Carole, sitting up. Frankie's eyes grew as wide as the full moon itself, as he stared at her in wonderment.

“What--how--but--”

“Cat got your tongue?” she asked, strangely confident, given how vulnerable she was, thought Frankie. There was an eerie calm in her voice.

“For a man as intelligent as yourself, doctor, you fell for one of the oldest tricks in the book. A vaudeville act, a magic trick. A cheezy special effect.”

Carole pushed up the sleeve of her nightgown and gently peeled off a long, thin, strip of synthetic skin. She held it up to the naked bulb shining above the table. It was almost translucent, but held the color of human flesh. And embedded within, were veins. Or what appeared to be human veins.

“Did I say magic trick?” asked Carole. And then she pulled a small remote control out of her pocket. “There is the tiniest little chip embedded in the synthetic skin. You see?” she asked, glowering at Frankie.

“I click it on, the false vein pulses. I click it off, the pulsing stops. On, the vein pulses. Off, no pulse. It wasn't even an expensive trick to pull off.”

Frankie had never been so caught off guard in his life. He looked at her, and shook his head. He looked at The Hired Man, then back at Carole.

“You cannot possibly think that you are safe now, Carole. . . just because you used this, as you put it yourself, cheap trick.”

“Quite the contrary,” said the Hired Man. “I'd say she is very safe.”

“But you--”

“I am the person she turned to when she found out the truth about you.”

“I don’t understand. . .” said Frankie, taking a step back.

Carole eased her way off the cold metal table, and stood in front of Frankie.

“Doctor, you said the strangest thing to me before I left the castle yesterday. Something about how you knew that I liked you because I told you what I'd found out, and that must have meant that I trusted you not to hurt me. Excuse me, but are you kidding? Of course I knew you'd hurt me. I knew you would kill me. I knew you would do to me what you did to my sister. So I called someone who I knew could help me. I figured he'd help me because he is, in fact, the father of my little girl.”

Frankie stammered retorts, but Carole ran over his weak words.

“David and I met several years ago, when I was working on a story. The personal aspects of our relationship aren't important, suffice it to say that he has been in my life ever since I got pregnant and decided to keep the child. And conveniently, he works for the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Your special friend in the Bureau, what's his name, Steve something, he doesn't run everything, he doesn't control everybody. You see, I had arranged for David to be standing by in a monitoring van, for the duration of my little visit to your castle. And after I discovered the cellar, and understood just how deep you were into all this--well, maybe I didn't know exactly how deeply--but I knew that you were in deep enough to be dangerous. Dangerous to me. So as soon as I left, I circled around to the van. They were monitoring everything you did, Frankie. They knew who you called, and they knew why you called him. He's locked up right now. In return for his cooperation, he might not face the death penalty. Emphasis on “might”. The rest is obvious. You had never actually met your killer-for-hire. So slipping David in here was easy enough.”

David smiled at Frankie in the dimming light. The clouds gathered in front of the moon, and the three of them were all bathed in blackness. But it was not so dark that Frankie could not see David's gun trained right on him.



“So I did kidnap Carole, per your request, Frankie,” said David. “How else could I get the video evidence you wanted so desperately?”

And now, we watch, once again, the kidnapping of Carole, but from a whole new vantage point. David sits in his car, pointing his camera up at Carole's balcony, watching her sip a glass of wine as she talks to her dog. After a few moments, Carole leaves the balcony. David starts the ignition, watching for Carole to emerge from the building.

Carole hurries down the steps and out to the parking lot. She is quite prepared for what is going to happen. The van drives by her, the door opens, and she is pulled in. Instantly, the perspective changes, and we are seeing the struggle through the eye of a camera installed in the upper corner of the van.

Then, the perspective changes again. We are outside the van, where a little bulldog puppy yaps and whines. Suddenly, the van stops, backs up, a door opens, and Carole grabs the dog. Back inside, Carole is soothing the dog. David shrugs his shoulders.

“I can edit that part out. Nice touch with the dog, by the way. Now let's get back into character. I have to record tying you up.”

“You're enjoying this just a little too much, you know that, David?”

The flashback dissolves back into Frankie's horrible reality.

Frankie stared at Carole and David, both of whom were smirking triumphantly. As insane as it sounded even in his own fevered brain, he felt somehow betrayed by Carole. He smiled weakly.

“Carole, tell me this one thing--this mysterious daughter of yours. Why don't I know about her? I mean, what I'm asking is, why does nobody know about her? All those interviews you've given? You never once mentioned anything about a child.”

Carole smiled, enjoying her position of power.

“Fair enough, Frankie. You haven't begun to tell me the whole truth about things. But you did open up a little, which is a big deal for you. So I'll do the same. When I found out I was pregnant, I did not want an abortion, no way. But I wasn't ready to get married to this guy. Although that is changing. . .”

Carole grinned at David, then looked back at Frankie.

“So I made a promise to my little girl that I would not be in her life as long as I was involved in all these dangerous stories. As long as I was waist deep in all this evil shit. So for now, my little girl grows up without me. I used to feel that I was noble for doing that, but now I just feel like I'm selfish.”

“And so now, what happens to me?” asked Frankie, his eyes darting around the room. David moved in to cuff him and waxed official.

“Depending on what all we find out, you'll either go to jail for a long time, or you'll get the death penalty fairly soon. And yes, it will be that nasty jail in the middle of nowhere, with serial killers and mad bombers for neighbors.”

David was about to click the cuffs around the doctor's wrists when a figure emerged from the darkness and hit David on the head. Carole screamed. Standing in the dim light, the figure was recognizable: Steve Hill, Frankie's raid partner. Frankie breathed a sigh of relief.

“Jesus, Steve, it took you long enough.”

Two other unrecognizable men in FBI jackets emerged from the darkness. David stared up at them. They all seem to recognize each other.

“What the hell?” sputtered David.

“Sorry, kid,” said Steve. “But I'm going to have to arrest you, for kidnapping this lovely lady. I tried to tell you, David, everybody is corrupt. Everyone can be bought. Don't you know that? There are higher loyalties. And higher and higher . . .and you don't even come close to being a player.”

Carole gazed at David. Her eyes were welling up with tears. She looked over at Frankie.

“I have not done a goddamn thing to deserve this, Frankie, and you know it. But, I know I’m going to die. Hell, I’d be dead already, if you had your way. So I'm going to make you just one request, before you. . . I want a glass of the wine.”

“Pardon?” said Frankie, caught off guard by this request.

“You heard me. If I'm going to die, I want to drink a glass of the wine. Her. My twin sister. I want to toast Christine.”

“Ah, yes, of course!” said Frankie, fascinated and delighted by her request. “You know, Carole, I certainly don't know why I would turn you down. That is one of the most sentimental, endearing, poetic requests I've ever heard made in the last moments before death. And as we know, dear, I've been there for many, many last moments before death.”

As he spoke, Frankie walked over to a cabinet, opened the drawer, and got out his favorite wine bottle opener. The handle was carved from ivory, in the shape of a beautiful mermaid, sporting a magnificent tail encrusted with real jewels. Then, Frankie opened the cabinet beneath the drawer, and pulled out one of *the* bottles. “Le Femme De Fleurs.” He walked over to Carole, put the bottle beside her on the table, then went back over to the cabinet to get two glasses. Not one glass, but two. Just two, and only two.

He returned to Carole’s side, looked deep into her eyes and kissed her. He knew she did not want the kiss, so he did not make it last for very long, even though, of course, he could have if he wanted to. For this restraint, he would forever mark himself as a gallant man. He might have done so much more. Instead, he took the bottle and the bottle opener, and went to work.

“Here you are, my dear. We’ll drink a glass and toast to your sister. Hell, let's drink the whole bloody bottle! We'll toast to her, and you, and anybody else you choose to raise a glass to, darling. This is your night, my love!”

It was the oddest of scenes. Frankie deftly opened the bottle as Carole, who knew she was about to die, looked on. David, helpless to save her, looked on. The other FBI agents, taking their direction from a placid Steve, looked on.

And when Frankie pulled the cork out of the bottle, it happened.

At first, it was quite nearly imperceptible. In fact, one would almost think that it depended on your personality, whether or not you saw what was happening. The FBI agents showed no evidence of seeing it, not at first. Frankie started to pour the wine. And then, everybody could see it. Small bits of crazed color, of laughing light, darted out of the bottle and into the eager air. Suddenly seized by a kind of insane elation, Carole instinctively clinked her glass to Frankie's and yelled, "To my sister! To Crissy! To the beautiful Christine, my twin."

And in that moment, the entity begin to coalesce. But its shape could not hold, and nothing resembling a body could form; the thing changed every second, with every gasp emitted by those who were watching it. For this was just one bottle of three hundred bottles that the vat had produced, and the spirit of Christine was in all of them. And all of her spirit was in none of them.

"That's it!" announced Carole, her epiphany causing her to both laugh hysterically, and sob in agony. "It's not her *soul*, Frankie, you evil fuck! It's not her soul. *It's her ghost!*"

And suddenly, a frantically transforming mass of ethereal plasma--at one moment seeming to be a body with hands, in another moment, a cloud of pure emotion, of rage beyond mortal ken--it flew across, and in front of, and behind, and through all of the people in the room. The agents were caught off guard; it was like no enemy they had ever encountered before. The distraction gave Carole the split second she needed to bolt out of the tight grasp that Frankie had on her, and she ran to the barrel labelled 'Femme de le Fleur'.

“Lady of the Flowers, this is your moment, baby!” Like a crazed person, Carole tried to open the vat of wine, clawing at it with her hands, but to no avail. Then she saw a mallet leaning up against the side of the barn, grabbed it, and began pounding on the vat.

Finally, it gave way, and the beautiful burgundy liquid came spilling out--and with it, Christine's ghost. It immediately began to shape itself into something that much more resembled a human form, something looking much more like a true ghost. Carole stared in wonderment. It was, indeed, her sister, Christine: her form was diaphanous and translucent. Most frightening of all, though, was her face. It changed every few seconds, as though it was taking on every expression she had ever invoked in two decades of acting, and allowing it to play across her visage like some ghastly theatrical tragedy. The face expressed elation at seeing her sister again, terror at being in these unknown surroundings, shame at no longer having the worshipped beauty she had associated with her former fleshy valise. Fury, at what had happened to her, and evil triumph, at sensing the new power she had as a different kind of being.

Everybody in the barn stood frozen, forming a strange, gothic tableau. Standing amidst the wreckage of the smashed vat, the beefy and bullying FBI agents were clearly petrified. So, too, was Frankie still like a statue. The only good guy, the only white hat in the group, David, was also in awe, and tried to move, but some invisible thing festering within himself was stopping him, keeping him immovable as well.

Then, in a superhuman display of supernatural energy, rare and draining, wrought by a tortured soul seeking sweet revenge, living a life after life, Christine's ghost picked up the mallet, and began flying around the barn, hammering away at the vats. She was hell bent on freeing the screaming spirits that only she could hear. Christine was unleashing the ghosts.

The ghosts. . .

And indeed they were ghosts. It was an army of ghosts; it was a legion of furious, vengeful, powerful spirits of women whose lives had been snuffed out long before their time. Here then, in this dark place lit only by the moonlight, the mob-energy of dozens of lifetimes, of aborted dreams, all reanimated at once to celebrate the power they had in death. The agents were terrified--even David, who sensed they meant him no ill, was petrified. Frankie's face revealed the bizarre blend of elation, at his confirmation that the supernatural did exist, with horror, at what he sensed was about to come to him.

Only Carole felt no fear. The rallying ghost's sweet sister, the only living and breathing woman in this dark place, knew they would not hurt her.

And so they did not hurt Carole, nor did they hurt the corrupt government minions, knowing that they would get their justice in life. Instead, they all went for Frankie. Suddenly Frankie was surrounded by the ghosts of women of all ages, of all sizes, of all passions and interests and agendas, who now had one common goal: to make him suffer as they had. Diaphanous hands were all over him as he was being pulled towards the vats, then lifted a little into the air, because his feet scrambling on the dirty ground slowed them down.

When he saw their destination, he began to scream and shriek and weep like a terrified little baby.

It was the wine press.

Carole could not control her reaction, she giggled and clapped her hands as the other men in the room just looked on in terror, wondering if they were next, but somehow still too frozen in their tracks to run from the barn. The gaggle of ghosts all shrieked and laughed as they clamped down hard on Frankie and pushed his head down under the pressing plate. Then, singing strange, otherworldly songs, they turned the crank. And turned it. And turned

it. The sound that came next was ghastly, although it could have reminded you of something as innocent as the splatting of a pumpkin, thrown by teenagers on the most raucous and haunted night of the year.

But this was not a pumpkin.

Suddenly, a figure rose up from the wine press . . . but it was not floating, so much as it was flailing and thrashing. It was Frankie. Frankie, too, was now a ghost. And as the women's delighted and bloodthirsty shrieks subsided, Frankie's otherworldly shrieks began, shrieking of agony no human could imagine on this side of the veil. Everybody in the barn just stared in horror, as some other-worldly force pulled Frankie down, down, down, through the very earth itself, and down into a well deserved Hell.

And then, yet another bizarre thing happened. But this was not terrifying, this was wonderful. And every human left alive in that barn knew exactly what was happening. The translucent and diaphanous figures of the women changed, ever so gradually. Now, they looked less and less like haunted humans, more and more like pure energy. They were what Carole had seen so long ago, on the recording Frankie had shown her: they were waves and thoughts. They were pure energy.

They were no longer ghosts, they were souls. Human souls. Carole watched, beaming with joy, as they coalesced and came apart and then came together again. For some reason--and in hindsight, she could see no other reason but the eternal truth of pure love--she still could see her sister as separate from them.

And her sister seemed content now. Beatified. Accomplished, and at true peace.

Everyone watched as the souls flew up, up, up, through the open skylight of the barn and into the darkness, until they could see nothing else of them. Knowing she was no longer in any danger from the federal officers, Carole casually walked over to the vat and looked inside. She dipped her hand in, and when she pulled her hand out, it was covered in blood. Carole simply smiled, and stared up at the heavens.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN:  
A FINAL TOAST

*“They are not long, the days of wine and roses:  
Out of a misty dream  
Our path emerges for a while, then closes  
Within a dream.”*

– Ernest Dowson, from "Vitae Summa Brevis"

*“What though youth gave love and roses,  
Age still leaves us friends and wine.”*

–Thomas Moore

Of course, the death of a man like Dr. Francis Stein was international news. And of course, the way that he died was whitewashed. His head had been crushed by a winepress, yes, but there was nothing supernatural about it.

So said the breaking news stories. And people bought it, because such tragic accidents had happened before at vineyards.

Carole had decided on a dinner party, to honor the life of the man. It wouldn't hurt her career either. Yes, Carole could have gone public, of course, with the events of that mind bending (or brain crushing, depending on who you're talking about) night, but her life was all about her daughter now, and so she chose the strategy of Mutually Assured Destruction Deterrence rather than breaking news. Carole did not trust the feds: she feared that if she told the truth about that night--and Frankie--that some sub rosa, ghastly punitive action might be taken against her. But she had recorded the events of that night; of course she and David had arranged that. She had proof of the corruption of certain agents of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. And they had the potential power to--well, you get it, what I am getting at, I am certain.

Such are the times we live in.

So there they all were in Carole's apartment: the Bonesmen, her fiancé David, and Carole, all gathered around a massive dining table that Carole had brought in just for the occasion. And from the chemistry they all shared, you would never guess that Carole, and David, and Steve all had been dancing with the Reaper just a week ago. They all behaved like fine old friends.

Carole had chosen the menu, and Carole had cooked the food. Exquisite surf and turf: pan seared scallops, frites, butternut squash with mushrooms and gruyère, waffle biscuits with syrup.

And blood sausage.

But of course this would be the menu; Frankie had written in a travel diary that this was his favorite meal that he had ever eaten.

There were many toasts to Frankie; in point of fact, each of the Bonesmen stood to offer one. They actually droned on and grew dull, as is usually the case in these situations: tedium can work its way into even the most tragic of circumstances. So we will leave you to imagine the toasts, just as you can imagine the two empty place settings created that night as a way of remembering the dead: Frankie. And poor Milton.

In a room down the hall, in a bedroom newly decorated for a child, Carole's daughter was being watched over by a sitter, while Winston, the bulldog puppy, lolled around on the bed.

It was peaceful in the house.

Meanwhile, outside, two Secret Service agents sat in their vehicle, monitoring the situation, and seeing to the safety and security of the President of the United States. The beefier of the two was passing the time by flipping through a thin book of poetry. It was the verse of ee cummings. He read aloud to keep his partner from nodding off:

*“ . . . the heart of this flower imagines  
the snow carefully everywhere descending;  
nothing which we are to perceive in this world equals  
the power of your intense fragility: whose texture  
compels me with the colour of its countries,  
rendering death and forever with each breathing*

*(i do not know what it is about you that closes  
and opens;only something in me understands  
the voice of your eyes is deeper than all roses)  
nobody,not even the rain,has such small hands”*

The words puzzled Hank, and he turned to Peter, who was listening with his eyes shut. He poked his partner to get his attention:

“Hey Petey, What the hell does that mean, anyway? ‘Nobody, not even the rain, has such small hands.’ Is this about that other President?”

LA DERNIÈRE GOUTTE