

# PAIRS

WITH

# LIFE



# JOHN TAYLOR

# **Pairs With Life**

*A Novel*

**John A. Taylor**



*To my brother, Steve;*

*Who handed me a cutlass,  
raised the Jolly Roger,  
and told me to get onboard.*

To Silverado Trail,  
Trancas/Monticello



To Oxbow District

To Napa River  
Promenade

# DISCOVER COOMBSVILLE

This map is an artistic rendition of Coombsville and may not be on scale or exact. This is not a complete representation of all the wineries, vintners and growers in the Coombsville AVA.

Paul Hobbs  
Nathan Coombs Estate

For more information regarding all of our amazing Coombsville Vintners and Growers, check out our website: [coombsvillenapa.org](http://coombsvillenapa.org)

@coombsvilleava f Coombsville Vintners and Growers

## VINTNERS & GROWERS

- ACKERMAN FAMILY VINEYARDS 707 238 9643
- ANGREVE WINES 707 295 3000
- ARCADIA VINEYARDS 707 204 8823
- ARROW & BRANCH 707 204 3845
- BENNETT VINEYARDS 707 204 1030
- BLACK CAT VINEYARD 707 321 0900
- BLUE OAK VINEYARD 707 291 2873
- CALDWELL WINEYARD 707 204 1204
- CARROLL FAMILY VINEYARD 831 234 9943
- CHENET VINEYARD 949 244 7564
- COOMBS ESTATE 707 204 1993
- DEAD FRED VINEYARD 707 204 4870
- DECHAUSS VALLEY VINEYARD 707 204 1408
- FANIANI VINEYARD 707 204 7993
- FARRELL VINEYARD 707 204 9498
- FAUST WINEYARD 707 204 2775
- FERRARIO VINEYARD 707 204 0871
- FERRARIO WINERY 825 963 9666
- FRANCIS VINEYARD 707 207 3845
- HAGAFEN CELLARS 707 204 0781
- HARRIS BUCKHEAD 707 942 6758
- HENDERICKSON FAMILY VINEYARDS 707 204 3628
- HESTIA FARMS 707 209 6900
- IMMACULATE VINEYARD 707 204 5406
- ITALICS VINEYARD 707 204 2008
- LE CHANCEAUX 707 204 1075
- MARITTA'S VINEYARD 707 204 3212
- MARCOON WINERY 707 207 3845
- MERLE WINES 707 204 5903
- METEOR VINEYARD 707 204 3900
- PALMAZ VINEYARDS 707 238 1887
- PATE, NAPA VALLEY 707 942 1638
- PALA HORSES WINERY 707 824 0878
- PORTER FAMILY VINEYARDS 707 942 0760
- PRIMO CELLARS 707 207 7427
- QUE SYRAH VINEYARD 707 207 4900
- ROCCA FAMILY VINEYARDS 707 204 3487
- SCALON CELLARS 707 866 0245
- SCHANDER FAMILY VINEYARD 707 204 4999
- HENDERICKSON ESTATE 707 204 1683
- BLVINGO VINEYARD 707 204 1770
- SILVER STAG WINERY 707 204 8112
- SIMPKINS FAMILY VINEYARDS 707 204 2381
- SODARO ESTATE 707 204 9245
- TERRABELLA VINEYARD 707 204 2100
- TOURNEOSI WINE 707 204 3960
- TULLOCH WINERY 707 204 4064

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# One

Let's get one thing clear - I won that bet fair and square, even though I cheated.

I blame the whole thing on Rick Dornin, who was being particularly douchey that night. I used to be able to choose whichever party I wanted to serve without question. That is, until Dornin arrived at Appellation with his anal-retentive online calendar and industrial-grade Napoleon complex.

Yes, *that* Appellation. The most coveted dining experience in all of Napa Valley, and one of only nine restaurants in America awarded three Michelin stars. It took a DNA sample and a copy of your credit report to get a table, and then you'd better be ready to cash in your 401(k) when the bill came.

The evening started out normally enough. I arrived at the restaurant an hour before my shift to check reservations, talk to Chef Dan about the evening's specials, and think of pairings for the *prix fixe*. Dornin was in his office—a modified broom closet next to the staff bathroom that looked like a hoarder's den with one, tiny deer trail leading to his desk. In fact, he was always in his office, even when service was slammed, which drove me batshit crazy. I don't care if you're General Manager or General Patton—when it's time to schlep a plate or buff a glass, you step up and do it.

Anyway, I poked my head through the doorway and said, “Hey, Rick,” trying to keep things light and cheery. “What do you know about this Harrison party at eight?”

“Whales,” he replied, not bothering to look up from his purchase orders. “Big whales, like Moby Dick whales.”

“Sweet!” Visions of stockbrokers trying to one-up each other with bottles of Screaming Eagle at five thousand bucks a pop danced in my head. Tips so big they come in a brown paper bag.

“Yes.” Dornin finally looked up at me and grinned like he learned how to do it from an infomercial. “They’ll be in the Veraison Room. With Andrew.”

“*What?*” I lunged into the tiny office, nearly tripping over a carton of water glasses. “You can’t give it to Andrew!”

“I can give it to whoever I want.” He went back to his purchase orders, feigning a *nonchalance* that made me want to smack him. “If I want to move Felipe off of bussing and let him pop some corks, I could do that, too.”

Time for a different tack—one that wouldn’t involve me going full-on Hannibal Lecter. “I’m just saying that a party like that comes to a restaurant like this to experience the highest level of service in the *world*. I’m the guy they’re coming for, not Andrew. I sit for my Master Somm next week, and—”

“You know what you are, Corbett? You’re an overpaid bartender.” Dornin had thin lips and an Adam’s apple the size of

Detroit, and it bugged me. “You trained for twenty years to learn how to pull a cork from a bottle and tell people that red wine goes with steak. Whoop-tee-freaking-do. You’ll work the floor tonight, and you can have the Jansen party on the terrace at seven-thirty.”

My left eyebrow started twitching, which happens when I get stressed out. Apparently, no one can see it, but to me, it feels like a two-year-old is digging tiny fingers into my face and stretching it like saltwater taffy. I considered trying the *No One Has Experience At Up-Selling Like I Do* approach, but this was the third time in as many weeks I’d had such a run-in with Dornin.

I was done.

It was time to talk to Chef Dan.

Most people remember Chef Daniel Foyer from his five seasons on *Elite Chef*, The Food Channel’s number one show from 1998 to 2002. With a chin so chiseled it could slice a burnt chuck steak and blue eyes that screamed, “Come taste this gazpacho in my bedroom,” he was the prototype celebrity chef. But Father Time had been most inhospitable to Chef Dan, and for the past couple of years the poor soul tried to counteract a rapid aging process by dunking his scalp and Sam Elliott-sized mustache in a fifty-gallon drum of jet-black hair dye. The net effect was so incongruous with the rest of his wrinkled face that I could barely look at him without drowning in the shore break of cognitive dissonance.

Don't get me wrong, I loved the guy. He was a loyal and trusted friend, and straight-up the most amazing culinary artist of my generation. But if I'd had any money, I would have bought stock in Just For Men and eventually retire on my Chef Dan profits alone.

I found Chef Dan at a table with his sous chef, Stacy, looking over some notes.

“Corbett Thomas!” he bellowed. “I’m doing a monkfish for the *prix fixe* tonight that’ll go beautifully with this Albarino you picked up.”

A near-empty bottle of 2016 Pazo Senorans sat on the table. “Yes, Chef. Sounds great,” I said hurriedly. “Hey, can I talk to you for a moment?”

“Sure.” Chef Dan handed his stack of papers to Stacy. “Take these,” he said to her, adding, “and if you want Geoffrey to be more forceful on the line, then tell him to stop being such a pussy.”

Stacy rolled her eyes. “Oh, that’s right,” Chef sighed. “We can’t say ‘pussy’ anymore.”

At sixty, Chef Dan was at least twice as old as everyone else at the restaurant. I was only twelve years behind him, which made us both anachronisms in the eyes of the staff—cautionary tales from a lost generation, something to be tolerated at best.

“All right, rock star,” Chef motioned me to sit down. “What can I do for you?”



“It’s Dornin,” I replied, taking Stacy’s seat. “There’s a party of major VIPs tonight and he’s giving it to Andrew.”

“That’s his job. He manages the staff. We’ve been over this.”

“I know, but you manage *him* and he’s doing a shitty job.” I grabbed the bottle of Albarino and poured the last of it in Stacy’s glass. It was gorgeous, the color of spring in Barcelona.

“God, you’re worse than Stacy.” He leaned back in his chair and ran his fingers through his asphalt hair. “Don’t take it so personal.”

“I’m not taking it personally.” I was. “It’s bad for the restaurant. It’s bad for the brand.”

Chef took the last swig of his wine and let out some ghastly noise that sounded like he’d been punched in the throat. “Look, you should know this by now, but every day a restaurant stays open is a miracle—a goddamn blessing. Rick’s doing something right, so let him do it. Revenue is up, the place is booked, everything’s working. Besides, Andrew needs the experience. What if you get gorged by a deer or something?”

“I’m sorry,” I stuttered. “What if I get *gored* by a deer?”

“You know, if you die,” he explained. “Randomly. But horribly.”

I got the feeling that he might enjoy that. “I just need to know if you’re considering my replacement.”

Chef Dan grabbed the wine glass from my hand and drank its contents in one gulp. “I’m not considering anything except a monkfish

entrée for tonight. And that's why Rick is here, so I don't have to consider you or Stacy or deal with any of the fucking drama in this place." He stared down the neck of the empty bottle like a telescope. "God, this stuff is good. Did you save me a case like I asked?"

"Yes. And you drank it all."

"Save me another."

I got up and walked away from the table. "You got it, Chef."

"Corbett," he called after me. "It's the worst kept secret that if you pass your sit next week, you're out of here."

I swear to God, the rumor mill at a restaurant was like playing a game of Telephone with a dozen drunk, horny sixteen-year-olds. "Look, I've always been honest with you, Chef. This is the best job I've ever had. Why in the hell would I leave?"

Chef Dan lumbered off towards the kitchen. "Why indeed, Rock Star?"

The whole Dornin and The Whales Episode was officially under my skin, so I decided to go out on the terrace and get some fresh air.

Appellation was built into the side of the foothills of the Vaca Range, about a half-mile up a winding road in Rutherford. Our terrace was one of the most stunning places to dine in all of Napa, as it looked out across a 180-degree panorama of the valley floor and was framed by the Mayacamas Mountains to the west.

I leaned against the waist-high railing atop the stone wall lining the terrace and soaked in the view. The vineyards below weaved a

delicate tapestry of early fall colors. Waves of vibrant green segued into pale yellow, which then collided with vibrant crimson and an orange so burnt it threatened to steal the glory from the autumn sun.

Twenty years earlier I drove into Napa on my way down to L.A., stopped for the afternoon, and never got back in my car. Now this place was a part of me. Looking out across the acreage of Cabernet and Chardonnay, I could set my watch by the changing of the vines. These colors told me it was the third week in October, the end of harvest.

This sunset told me I was home.

The bucolic scene may have calmed my shit for a moment, until I felt a disturbing presence beside me. A peripheral glance confirmed it, and my grip unconsciously tightened around the railing as Andrew Ridgley moved up quietly next to me, seemingly taking in the view, but mostly standing there just to piss me off.

Andrew was preternaturally thin, to the point where his midsection curved in slightly, giving him the appearance of a flat Pillsbury Crescent roll. A man bun popped from the top of his tiny head like a lonely radish in a barren field, and his face was framed by a freakish red beard, in which every single hair was of uniform length and curvature. If he was going for the King of the Very Polite Vikings look, he nailed it.

“So,” I started, still gazing at the majestic scene before me, “might one call those pistachio-colored Capri pants?”

“One might,” he replied, faux ignoring me as well. “Might one call that the world’s most heteronormative blue blazer?”

I nodded. “One might, if one knew what the word ‘heteronormative’ meant.”

“I rest my case.”

I turned to face him. At six-foot-four, I was a foot taller and had at least seventy-five pounds on him. I wasn’t going for intimidation, though. Ok, not *a lot* of intimidation. “You getting the Harrison party only proves that there’s no such thing as a just and benevolent God.”

Andrew scratched his beard mockingly. Not a single hair was displaced. “Harrison? Oh, you mean Harrison-Lowell Partners? The massive private equity firm whose board is having their party here tonight? Those guys?”

I wanted to rip my face off. The truth was, Andrew was half my age, but only a few steps behind me. He was an Advanced Somm, a WSET-3, CSW, and a whole bunch of other mostly useless acronyms. But he had mad tasting skills, which while also hating, I grudgingly respected too.

“Just...get them to do different bottles with each course,” I said, trying to mask my aggravation. “No by-the-glass stuff and none of those imports I got on special—”

“Gee, thanks, Corbett,” he interrupted. “I’ll do my best to remember all of that complex and really insightful information.” He walked backwards towards the door, a smug little smirk spreading

across his face. “In the meantime, you have an absolutely awesome evening with your bachelorette party.”

On my eighth birthday, my mom woke me up at 3:00 a.m., dragged me out of bed and into the cold backseat of her Datsun hatchback and said, “We’re going to Disneyland.” I’d never been but leave it to say I could sing all five verses of “Yo Ho, Yo Ho (A Pirate’s Life For Me).” She didn’t pack anything except a bologna and American cheese sandwich for me, and a thermos filled with “Mommy’s Orange Juice” for her. We drove seven hours from Tucson to Los Angeles, got out, and discovered the park was closed.

“Oh,” she had said with a frown. She shoved me back in the car and we drove home to Tucson without saying a word.

When I heard that Jansen was a bachelorette party, it felt a lot like that.

I already knew in agonizing detail how the whole night would unfold. Jansen was a party of fifteen, but only thirteen would show up, because the group had been out wine tasting the entire day, and two girls would have already passed out at the hotel, their heads balanced delicately over the edge of the bed to avoid vomit asphyxiation.

Festivities would start with a round of Lemon Drops, followed by selfies, followed by a round of Himalayan Blow Jobs (the shot, not the Sherpa-based sex act), and more selfies. There’d be a polite but stern noise complaint from a nearby diner, which would be met with

vitriol and retribution from the maid of honor, and eventually every single customer on the terrace would have to be re-seated with a comped entrée.

By the start of the second course, two more bridesmaids would be “Man down!” and loaded into the limo to be whisked away. This would cause the Bride to launch into Tearful and Wailing Speech Number One: *Don't You Understand This Is My Wedding?* The remedy for this drama would be another round of shots, followed by the meat course, which everyone would secretly *want* to eat but no one *will* eat.

I would then be asked if dancing is allowed. I would say no. This would be met with Tearful and Wailing Speech Number Two: *Don't You Fucking Understand This Is My Wedding?*

At the end of the evening, three of the four remaining conscious bridesmaids would attempt to split the check, and they would get it wrong three times. It would be my fault, obviously, and then Drunk Math would result in a three-hundred-dollar underpayment, coming out of the service charge.

“I'll bet you a hundred bucks I sell the most expensive bottle tonight,” I blurted. I'm not exactly sure why I said it: Anger at a manager who didn't respect who I was or what I'd been through; or jealousy of a kid who accomplished in six years what took me twenty.

Andrew froze at the door. “Wait, what? Are you serious?”

“Dead serious,” I said.

Andrew folded his arms across his chest and stared at me as if I asked him to solve a quadratic equation. “So, you’ll bet me a hundred dollars that you can sell a more expensive wine to the Mike’s Hard Lemonade Crew than I can to the Board of Directors of the nation’s third-largest private equity firm?”

*Well, when you put it that way...* No matter. I was betting on my ability to optimize potential. I mean, it’s not like the Jansens had booked their party at Applebee’s.

“You got it.”

“You’re on.” Andrew stuck out his hand and I shook it. He had that kind of non-committal handshake that feels like you’re clutching a wet hunk of pork loin. I dropped his hand and brushed past him.

I’ll never say out loud that I doubted my potential to win the bet, but it crossed my mind to add Franzia to the system and charge \$1,000.00 per box for it.

Helena was leading service for the Jansen party that night, which was good news. She was awesome—an absolute pro at her job, and mostly unflappable. We met for a few minutes to talk strategy. I didn’t tell her about the bet, though maybe I should have, because she thought it was rather odd of me to be so concerned about a bachelorette party.

“Chances are we aren’t even going to need you,” she said.

“How sexist,” I admonished her, practically vomiting hypocrisy. “What if the bride is a director at Google? And all her friends are instructors at the Culinary Institute? What if they’re all writers for *Wine Spectator*?”

She wasn’t, they weren’t, and hell no.

When the bride-to-be finally sashayed into the restaurant atop a wave of millennial entitlement, it was as obvious as the rhinestone tiara atop her head that there would not be a single fuck given to the wine list. I had to admit, though, that the bride glowed; she beamed. She was all shiny teeth, dewy skin and smoky eyes, and radiating with the glorious possibility of a love eternal—a happiness unhinged and unfettered, as ethereal as a dream whispered to the breeze. It was practically contagious, something I could inhale or feel wash over me for one perfect moment as she sauntered by.

Oh, well. Life would drop its fucking jackboot on her heart soon enough.

Helena agreed to let me go in before she asked for an initial drink order, just to see if I could sell them on wine and not something vodka based. I gave the group exactly seven minutes on the terrace before making my entrance.

They were snapping selfies like the paparazzi. I could have been Ryan Gosling riding in naked on a unicorn and no one would have noticed.



“Good evening, ladies!” I bellowed. Mostly silence. “And a special hello to our beautiful bride-to-be, Nicole!” That got a few ‘woot-woots.’

“My name is Corbett and I will be your sommelier tonight.”  
Blank stares. “That means I’m the wine guy—”

“Champers!” Nicole screamed, followed by a chorus of twelve other screams.

Champagne was a good sign, and the only indication so far that Andrew was not going to hand me my ass on this bet. The next step was to identify The Decision Maker of the group. Though typically the bride gets what the bride wants, there’s usually somebody else lurking on the periphery who foots the bill. I didn’t see an obvious candidate as the party walked in, but as I opened the list to the sparkling wine section and brought it over to the bride, I noticed one woman at the far side of the table who was definitely closer to my age than theirs. Her dress was just a tad less revealing than the spaghetti-strap numbers that dominated the herd, and her general demeanor belied a more mature—if not matriarchal—attitude. I made note of her but brought the list to Nicole, nonetheless.

“May I suggest the Nicolas Feuillatte,” I offered first. “It’s a beautiful, delicious, creamy Champagne.” Then I moved in for the kill. “But what I like to recommend is a bottle of the 2007 Cristal for just you and the maid of honor. You know, something to keep under the table, special for the two of you.” Sincere smile, friendly wink, and

that'll be seven hundred dollars: a solid start, but perhaps not enough to drop the mic on Andrew.

“Yasss Queen!” One of the bridesmaids rushed up, threw her arms around Nicole’s waist, and squeezed hard before turning to me. “We need Prosecco! Have you ever heard of Prosecco?”

“Prosecco, hmm, I may have to look it up.” I knew I’d have to deep-six the sarcasm, or I’d be a hundred bucks short by the end of the night. A very, very *long* night.

We did have a Cartizze Prosecco at \$150, but I didn’t have the heart to spring that on them.

On my way into the cellar to grab the wine, Andrew came out, holding two bottles.

“The ’14 Edmond Vatan Sancerre,” he crowed.

Ugh. Three hundred bucks a bottle, and that’s just the first course. “Your suggestion, or does someone know what they’re doing?”

“Two collectors. They’re completely geeking out.”

This was not a good development. “That’s all right. The maid of honor is the sous chef at Franglais in Los Angeles,” I said.

“No, she’s not,” Andrew dismissed, walking off.

“Your parents named you after the guy who did nothing in *Wham!*” I called after him.

“I don’t even know what that means,” he called back.

By the time I got back to the table, Helena’s crew had already set up the glasses. Since we were out on the terrace and the mood was

festive, I took one bottle and popped the cork like a rocket. That elicited another round of screams, which in turn elicited the first round of noise complaints from the neighbors.

As I poured the wine, I couldn't help but notice the older woman from before. She was alternately staring at me and her phone. This continued the whole time I went down the line of glasses until I reached the one in front of her.

"I know you," she said.

"You do?"

She held her phone up to me, and there I was, guitar in hand, circa 1995. "You're Sensitive Ponytail Guy!" she squealed.

Here's the thing. It never gets old being recognized, and I have an ego-gasm every time it happens. Honestly, twenty years later, it totally makes my day. That said, my brief brushes with fame are exactly the same every single time, so my response has become perfectly crafted over the last two decades.

"Yep, you got me. I was lead singer and guitarist for Reality Star." I smiled. "That was my band. But you have to understand, I was singing *about* Sensitive Ponytail Guy. That's the irony of the song."

"Oh my god!" She went back to looking at the music video playing on her phone. "I saw you guys open for Soundgarden in 1994. I loved this video."

"Thank you, I really appreciate that." I was still smiling like an ego-fueled dork, but knew I had to get back to business. "So, hey,

maybe you'd like to take a look at the wine list and see if there's something special you'd—"

A young woman dropped a case of wine on the table beside me. "Ok, bitches! It is ON!"

It was unfortunate to say the least, but it wasn't uncommon for guests to bring bottles to the restaurant that they'd purchased on their wine tasting adventures. I could only hope that Andrew's group did the same, because this turn of events was probably the bet's death knell.

I opened the case and immediately saw that all the capsules were the same. I took out one bottle. Then another. Then one more. My stomach became the Pit of Despair, tied in more knots than a maritime museum.

I read the label aloud, like I was reading my own death sentence. "Rich Bitch Chardonnay."

"Rich Bitch!" the young woman screamed. "You're a fucking rich bitch, Nicole! WOOOOOOOO!"

More screams. All the screams.

Rich Bitch Chardonnay. \$12.95 at the local Safeway ("but only \$9.95 when you buy six or more!"). There were about seventy-three smartass, wine snob responses I could have said. Instead, I sulked off to find Helena.

*One dozen red Solo cups for table eight, please.*

Andrew was at the terrace door, waiting. He'd probably seen the whole episode go down and wanted to twist the corkscrew even further

into my heart. Silently, without expression, he presented a bottle of 2006 Domain Armand Rousseau Charmes Chambertin Grand Cru.

I found that I was still carrying a bottle of the Rich Bitch, much the same way Jesus had to carry his own cross. I presented it to Andrew in return. He pursed his lips and nodded - I think he felt sorry for me.

“If memory serves,” he noted, “that bottle does not cost twelve hundred dollars.”

I didn't go back to the Jansen party. What was the point? The servers could pour the case of plonk, and if by some miracle they needed me for something else, Helena would come find me.

I worked the floor for a little while, which typically lifted my spirits when guests needed recommendations or wanted to chat about some extraordinary winery they had discovered that day. On this particular night, it wasn't working.

I hadn't been entirely honest with Chef Dan. No, I didn't want to leave Appellation once I got my credentials. Not because I loved working 3:00 p.m. to 1:00 a.m. six nights a week or dealing with bachelorettes who didn't know their chardonnay from Kool-Aid or losing a bet to a somm who recently graduated from Gymboree.

I wanted to stay for the clout. For the respect. It wasn't exactly like performing before 30,000 screaming fans, but Master Sommeliers were rock stars in their own right. There were only 236 of them in the entire freaking world.

And with that notch on my wine key, I could kiss the world of one-bedroom apartments and Top Ramen goodbye forever. Seamus O’Flaherty, my partner in crime (though attorneys hate being described that way), had been lining me up some pretty amazing freelance gigs over the past year: marketing consultations, restaurant wine lists, that sort of thing. Ten times the money and half the work. As a Master Sommelier leading the wine program at the top restaurant in Napa Valley, well, let’s just say I wouldn’t have to take out an ad on Craigslist to get more consulting work than I could possibly handle.

I took my fifteen-minute break in the kitchen—a practice that was usually frowned upon. Though there’s no such thing as a “slow night” for a restaurant that’s fully booked six months in advance. However, I was able to convince Stacy to take pity on me and fix me a double portion of the pork belly course. As comfort food went, it was pure heroin, melting in my mouth like so much pig fat happiness.

And then I saw Rick Dornin.

More appropriately, he saw me, and his face twisted into a perturbed expression that only occurs when somebody yanks on the stick that’s been wedged up your ass for thirty-five years.

“You shouldn’t be in here,” he said. “And didn’t you already get your dinner before service?”

“Richard!” I said with game show host enthusiasm. “What, pray tell, brings you out of your shit hole on this fine evening?”

“Seriously, if you have to eat that, do it in your office. But if you’ve already—” He stopped suddenly, and his lips cracked into some bizarre, smile-like expression. “On second thought, you just stay here and enjoy that. Shouldn’t kick a man when he’s down.” He patted me on the shoulder condescendingly.

“What are you talking about?” I asked, although I already feared the answer.

Dornin didn’t reply, but if smarm was a moisturizer, it was slathered all over his sunken face. He gave me one more shoulder pat and walked past me. “Never take a bet you can’t win, Corbett.”

Freaking Andrew. I could just see him scurrying into Dornin’s rat hole to tell him all about our bet, his lips awash with the golden-brown hue of a major ass-kissing. The kid wanted my job in the worst way and was probably willing to be paid even less for it. Worse, Dornin was looking for any excuse to give it to him.

I ran out of the kitchen and caught up with Dornin outside his office. “You’re right, I shouldn’t take a bet I can’t win. So, here’s the deal. I’ll bet you I pass my sit next week and become a Master Somm. If I do, you just stay out of my way around here. You can set my hours, but I choose my parties, and I don’t answer to you.”

Dornin raised a cynical eyebrow. “And if you don’t pass?”

“Then Andrew can be Lead Somm. I’ll do what you ask me to, no questions asked.”

Dornin nodded. “And you won’t run off and complain to Chef Dan like a little bitch?”

I glared. “We don’t get to use the word ‘bitch’ anymore. Bitch.”

“It’s a bet.” He tried to do that grinning thing again; it made me want to press my thumbs into his cheeks and guide his face into what an actual smile looks like.

As Dornin slithered into his lair, I felt an uneasy sense of relief mixed with anxiety. A week from now, The Dornin Problem would be settled once and for all. All I had to do was pass my exam.

An exam I had failed the year before.

And the year before that.

It was time for a confidence boost.

I took a deep breath and headed back out to the terrace. Maybe the Rock Mom had gotten drunk enough to order a dessert wine, like a Chateau d’Yquem at \$1,500 a pop?

The party was in that loose, transition phase from Not Eating The Meat Course to Dancing On The Tables And Garnering Noise Complaints. I found a half-full bottle of the Rich Bitch Chardonnay and went around the table, pouring it out, listening for an opportunity. I couldn’t even find Rock Mom anymore. She probably bowed out an hour ago. I know I would have.

“Hey, are you the wine guy?” It was the girl who brought the case of wine.

“How can I help you, ma’am?”



She held up a bottle of Rich Bitch. “Can you open this for me? It’s the last one. I kept it hidden from everyone else,” she giggled.

I smiled in resignation as I reached for the bottle and took out my wine key. “So, are you a big fan of chardonnay?”

“Hells yeah!” she said. “Chardonnay is my jam.”

I stopped opening the bottle and stared at her for a moment. She had these huge eyes, like something out of a Japanese anime cartoon, but more inquisitive and less vapid.

“Hold on a second,” I said, handing the bottle back to her. “You take this, and stay right here, ok? I’ll be right back—don’t go anywhere!”

“Uh, ok.” Her voice was in the initial stages of slurring.

I dashed off to the cellar. I knew we only had one bottle left, and thankfully the price wasn’t marked up three times the way we normally do for the rare stuff. I grabbed it and raced back up to the floor, where I found Helena.

“Hey, the Jansen party just ordered this,” I said, showing her the bottle. “But they want it on a separate check, so I’ll ring it up, ok?”

“Jesus,” she said, in sincere shock. “Nice work. You want me to bring out more glasses?”

“No, but thanks.” I headed back out to the terrace to find that Powerpuff Girl was still there, in pretty much the exact same position as when I left, holding the unopened chardonnay.

I presented my bottle to her. “This is the 2009 Domain Ramonet Montrachet, Grand Cru, from Cote de Beaune in France,” I said. “This is a chardonnay, too, and I want you to try it.”

I gingerly pulled the cork and poured a few ounces in each of our glasses. I didn’t want to lose her attention or put her off with some long-winded Five Step Program To Fine Wine Enjoyment bullshit, so I just quickly sniffed the glass for flaws and handed it to her. “Now, drink this.”

She looked a bit tentative at first but raised the glass to her lips and took a healthy mouthful. And within a few moments, I saw it. By God, I knew it would happen. Her pupils dilated, her cheeks flushed, and a tiny smile pushed at the corner of her lips.

“Oh my God,” she whispered. “This is amazing. This is chardonnay? I mean, I can taste it, but it’s like...”

“Different? Unbelievable? Unlike any chardonnay you’ve had before?”

“Yes!”

“Yes!” I screamed. “Yes!” I threw up my arms. “Welcome to my world.”

I sat down next to her and filled our glasses. She took another sip, almost greedily this time. “You have taken the red pill,” I said. “Nothing will ever be the same now.”

She gave me the I Don’t Have A Clue What You’re Talking About But I’m Not Going To Admit It smile, and kept on drinking.

“Wine is life in a glass.” I said, gazing lovingly at the amazing juice in my glass. “It’s art, it’s history, it’s chemistry—like the chemistry of sex.” I touched my glass to hers, then breathed in the amazing essence of the wine. It was as though you could take the feeling of floating atop a field of sunflowers and catch it in a wine glass.

“Most important of all, wine is an adventure, a journey without end. Take it. Soak it up like a sponge. Never come back.” I took my glass and got up from the table.

“Wait,” she called after me, holding up the bottle. “Do I get to keep this?”

“Absolutely. Share it with somebody you love,” I told her. “And when you’re done, keep that bottle. Remember this night.”

I walked back to the servers’ station to ring up the Domain Ramonet—\$1,542.56 after tax. Paying the rent was highly overrated anyway. I swiped my card and prayed for it to not be declined, then signed the check “Rock Mom Jansen” with a signature so interpretive, no one would ever be able to decipher it.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” came a voice from behind me. It was Andrew, and I figured I was busted for sure. “The 2009 Montrachet? There’s no way.”

“Read it and weep,” I said, quickly flashing him the illegible receipt. “What else you got?”

“The Armand Rousseau was it,” he said.

I wanted to sympathetically pat the top of his man bun but decided against it. “Hey, nothing to be ashamed of.” I handed him the glass I poured. “Here,” I smirked, “best consolation prize in the universe.”

The rest of the night went on as normal, with the last guests having to be politely escorted out the door and put into an Uber at 11:00 p.m. By midnight, most of the kitchen and wait staff were at the bar, and by the time I was leaving at 1:00 a.m., they had worked their way to the top shelf stuff, with Chef Dan taking the lead.

“Corbett!” he shouted. “Come on, come have a drink.”

“Yeah, thanks, Chef, but I gotta bow out tonight,” I said. “I need to study for my sit.”

“What, at one in the morning?”

“No, at nine in the morning, which means no drinking at one in the morning.”

He waved me off, and the rest of the crew shouted their loud if not incoherent goodbyes. They were an obnoxious group of incestuous, alcoholic vampires, but the only time I’d ever felt the same sense of brotherhood that I had in the band was when I worked in a restaurant.

“Hey!” Andrew caught up with me at the front door, a hundred-dollar bill sticking up like a middle finger in his clenched fist.

“It’s alright. Go ahead and keep it.”

“No, dude,” he protested. “You won, fair and square.”

“So, look,” I deflected, “they gave me a fat, cash tip on the way out, ok?”

“Really? How much?”

I took the hundred from his hand and stuffed it in his shirt pocket. “Enough for you to keep this,” I muttered. “Good night, Andrew.”

I walked out into the darkness of the parking lot. On these autumn nights, the Milky Way smeared across the sky like actual spilled milk.

“You’re still the man, Corbett!” Andrew drunkenly shouted across the parking lot. “You’re still the man!”

*Damn right I am.* And yet, even as my arm strained to pat my own back, I knew that a far more important bet—a far more important test—was still ahead of me. And cheating, no matter how I was able to spin it, would not be an option.

## Two

I knew that Remy was in a desperate and manic emotional state when her message said, “It’s imperative that we discuss this issue at your earliest convenience.” For her, that was as close to a cry for help from the edge of the abyss as I was ever going to hear.

I had turned my phone off while I was studying so it wouldn’t be such a temptation. I typically never turn my phone off, just in case there’s some kind of progeny/money/sex/wine emergency, but there’s something about trying to memorize the primary grape varietals of each of the Chianti DOCG sub-zones that makes me yearn for the crack-like distraction a smartphone can provide. So, I did the right thing and shut it off, and of course that was the time I missed a call from my daughter.

According to her message, there was “an issue” to which she had “applied a considerable amount of thought,” and which now was “worthy of a discussion,” for which I should “be prepared to give my complete focus.” In Remy-speak, this meant the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse were nigh, and the River of Blood would soon consume us all.

I called her back and suggested dinner. When she said she’d go ahead and make the two-hour drive from Milpitas to Napa, it could only mean that we were already beset by the plague of frogs. Studying for

the Practical was shot for the day now, as there'd be no way to concentrate.

For a moment, I entertained the notion that maybe Remy had good news, like she had fallen in love or was considering giving up her stale, due diligence job to fly off to Rhodesia and help leper children. But on second thought, there was no way. Because Remy.

As a little girl, Remy showed signs of following in her daddy's footsteps. She had a genuine musical talent and would sing songs she made up into her *Finding Nemo* MP3 recorder ("You've Got The Freaky" and "Bubblegum Sherbet Face" were two of my personal favorites). By the time she was eleven, however, she was demonstrating an accelerated aptitude in math and it became her new obsession. I was sorry to see the nascent songwriting fall by the wayside but tried to adopt the attitude that passion is passion, no matter what stupid form it took.

I also had visions of making her the world's first child sommelier. With a young, unformed brain, she was in the best position possible to open her mind to the limitless sensory experience of wine.

"What does it smell like?" I'd say, sliding my glass of syrah over to her.

"Like grape juice, only yucky," she'd respond.

"Sure, but what else?" I prodded. "Like, I smell cherries in there. And an oak tree. And the way the backyard smells after it rains."

It only took a few weeks of this before she'd grab my glass of chardonnay, swirl it around, take a whiff and proclaim, "It smells like you got a Hostess Lemon Pie from 7-11 and poked your finger in it to make a gooey-lemon smiley face."

After that, she would rate every wine I drank on the Unicorn Fart Scale, with only the "most un-grossest" wines getting a coveted Ten Unicorn Farts.

Eventually, she lost interest in that as well. Even when she got deep into the teenage years, she wasn't interested in seriously trying wine, or even drinking at all. I honestly don't know where she got that, as I had wine in the house 24/7 and her mother was a Hall of Fame-caliber functional alcoholic.

Remy met me at Pinot, which is the closest thing to a "locals" place available in downtown Napa. Just like anywhere in the world, a great locals place is one where the food is cheap, the drinks are strong, and you know you'll always find someone there you want to talk to. "Cheap" and "Napa" just don't go together, but Pinot found a way to stay in business longer than any place I'd seen in the valley, so it won by default.

As always, Remy arrived freakishly on time. Thankfully, my anxiety had taken the steering wheel and got me there early enough to start on a gin and tonic. As expected, Remy arrived exactly at 6:00PM. She believed that being late was the ultimate sign of disrespect, and I'll



be damned if she didn't always, *always* find some way to live by that creed.

“Hi, dad,” she said, greeting me with a Remy Kiss.

Even as a baby, Remy dictated the conditions of affection.

“Daddy, I want you to hug me,” my toddling Princess of Wonderland would say, and my heart would melt into Cream of Wheat as I embraced her tiny frame and breathed in her Johnson's Baby Shampoo yumminess. Then she'd suddenly stiff arm me and say, “That's enough,” before walking away.

“Can I get you a drink?” I offered.

“Just a soda water and lime,” she said, setting her purse down and sliding into the booth. “It's a school night and I still have work to do.”

*So did I, until you completely freaked out on me.* I could already tell this would be the first of three palliative gin and tonics.

Remy hadn't inherited my lanky tallness, nor my square jaw, nor my untamable, wavy brown hair. She was blessed with more of her mother's features: piercing grey eyes, near-platinum blonde hair, and lips she could have inherited from Angelina Jolie. Remy had grown up being Queen of the Geek Girls, a title she assumed without effort. Even now, with her hair pulled back tight and wearing her dark-rimmed Clark Kent glasses with a Devo T-shirt, she could have come straight from her high school Science Club meeting.

I crossed my hands on top of the table and stared at her in that mocking way that said, “I presume you’re now calling this meeting to order?”—which generally ticked her off. I couldn’t help it. Remy was Remy and I loved her, not despite it, but because of it.

“So, what’s up, sweetheart?” I asked, knowing there wouldn’t be anything so cliché as making small talk or ordering dinner first. And yes, I was genuinely concerned.

“It’s about mom,” she said, diving in with characteristic lack of preamble.

*Hey, check it out: a Can of Worms is the featured special tonight. Oh, and it’s free!*

“Ah,” was my non-committal response before I took a long pull of my gin and tonic. The trick to keeping a can of worms closed is to not offer up a can opener.

Remy didn’t do things like shift uncomfortably or tap on the table nervously as she considered what to say next. She had thought about every conceivable angle, topic and objection, and knew her responses well in advance. I half-expected a PowerPoint presentation to hit the table.

“I have been trying to process some issues in the wake of mom’s death,” she continued. “But there are a lot of gaps in the information I have. I want to know more about her. I want to know what happened between the two of you. The truth as to why you divorced.”

I waved down our server and ordered another gin and tonic.

“Double tall,” I requested, “and a soda water and lime for my therapist.”

“Dad, I’m serious.”

“No shit,” I chuckled.

Remy’s mother had died unexpectedly. She checked into the hospital for a routine medical procedure, caught some kind of nasty infection, then died of sepsis only a week later.

“Look, sweetheart, you know I’ve never said anything bad about your mother.”

“I know. You don’t say *anything* about her. I have no idea how you feel.”

“How I feel?” I was genuinely surprised. Feelings? Really?

Remy was unnaturally good at maintaining eye contact. She never looked away during a conversation, which was almost as disconcerting as looking away all the time. “You know, mom wasn’t above talking shit about you on occasion. Especially on occasions that involved new business ventures.”

“I kind of figured.” Behind the scenes, Remy’s mom and I fought ferociously, with email as our weapon of choice. We divorced when Remy was barely two. I stayed in Napa, she moved down to San Francisco, and though it wasn’t much of a distance—relatively speaking—our custody battle was a war with massive injuries on both sides and no clear victor.

“Honey, your mom died over a year ago. I know it’s hard. Is this something you’ve been holding in all this time?”

“It’s been hard,” Remy said. “So, how come it hasn’t been hard on you? You didn’t even come to the funeral.”

The server arrived with a tray. *Thank. Freaking. God.*

“Oh, look! Alcohol!” I grabbed the sacred gin and tonic and sucked down half, hoping the magic elixir would transport me to someplace far, far away. The server, who I think was named Penny, also placed a small pour of red wine and a spit cup in front of me.

“This is from Christophe,” she said. “He said you have to figure out what it is.”

“What, he can’t read the label?” I grinned broadly at Remy. She did not grin back.

Christophe owned Pinot and had one of the most amazing palates I’d ever encountered. He was also generous enough to host my wine study groups after hours on Mondays, when he was closed. All he wanted in return was the opportunity to sit in on occasion and learn.

I swirled the wine for a bit and noticed Remy glaring her disapproval at me. I wasn’t exactly sure why this dinner meeting was all about spoon-feeding shit into the fan, but I’d take any distraction available to avoid whatever was coming next.

I stuck my nose in the glass and breathed in. “Nice.” It smelled like a girl named Ciara, running wistfully through a grove of cherry trees. Of course, that particular analysis would only get me laughed out

of my sit the following week. For somms, identifying a wine is all about using the Deductive Tasting Method. So, I dove right in.

“Ok, wine number one is a red wine of medium-minus concentration, a ruby core fading to a garnet rim, medium-plus intensity, day-bright but fairly pale with medium-plus to high viscosity.”

In other words, it looked red.

“On the nose, medium-plus intensity, red fruit. Strawberry, cherry, raspberry, red plum, hint of fig. Cocoa powder, mocha, cherry cola, mushroom and baked clay...earth, not like a pinot, though.”

Or, it smelled like the aforementioned Italian girl in the orchard. I took in a mouthful of the wine, swished it around for a moment, then spit it in the cup.

“Dry. Medium, medium-plus acidity, medium alcohol, medium-plus intensity. Mix of dried and ripe red fruits, olives, tobacco, brine, dried flowers. Shows age, no new oak. Well, maybe new oak. Damnit.”

Christophe, that Belgian bastard, knew that bold Italian reds were still my weakness. He brought this one over on purpose. I took in another large mouthful and swished it around every square centimeter of my oral cavity.

*Spit it back in the glass, Corbett, and name the damn wine. You can do this.*

They say you don't have taste buds anywhere except on your tongue, but damn it, there was something about the texture and

mouthfeel of Italian reds that only became apparent to me when I swallowed. There'd be none of that at the exam next week, so I spit back in the glass.

“1999, *Riserva, Biondi Santi, Toscana,*” I offered up.

Possibly Penny looked at a slip of paper in her hand. “Close,” she said. “2008.”

“Dog fucker,” I mumbled. Should have known.

“Still, that was really impressive,” said Possibly Penny. Remy rolled her eyes.

“Thanks,” I said. “And hey, tell Christophe I appreciate it, and I'll come back and say hi after dinner.”

“OK,” she said. “Are you guys ready to order?”

“No,” Remy said. “Give us a minute. Or ten.”

To drive the point home, Remy took the menu and slid it over to the far side of the table: Possibly Penny walked off without a word.

“So, how are things going with that motor deal?” I asked. It was useless to sidetrack Remy, but I had to try something.

“Rotor, not motor,” she answered. The firm she worked for crunched numbers for venture capitalists looking to acquire green businesses. She found it to be fascinating stuff. “And it's fine. I think they're going to go public, though.”

“Oh!” I jumped at the opening. “That's a good thing, right?”

Remy sipped her soda and lime, looking like an android imitating a person drinking—a really pissed off android that’s trying desperately not to reach over the table and commit an act of violence.

“What happened?” she asked. “Why did you guys divorce?”

There was the eye twitching again. I drained the rest of my gin and tonic in two huge gulps and let out an overly dramatic sigh. “Oh, geez, Remy,” I whispered.

My brain worked overtime to carefully choose the right words, like trying to pick out a branch from a jammed lawnmower that was still running. “I honestly don’t see what possible good could come from dredging all this up.”

“Well, that’s up to me to decide.”

And then, like a Guardian Angel, Seamus appeared. “Shay Money!” I shouted.

He stood near the hostess desk, looking around in a rather bewildered way until I caught his attention and he raced over to the table.

“Jesus, bro. Don’t you know how to answer a fucking text?” He noticed Remy on the opposite side of the booth and slipped in to sit down, giving her a quick hug. “Oh, hey honey! Are you fabulous?”

“Fabulous, Uncle Shay.” Her monotone gave away how disappointed she was at the interruption.

“I thought I might find you here,” he said, unfazed, turning back to me. “I’ve been calling and texting you for the last hour. Swear to god I’m gonna duct tape your phone to your fucking head.”

I shrugged. “I left my phone in the car so I could devote my full attention to my wonderful daughter.”

“Seriously?” Remy was genuinely shocked. “In the car? Who does that?”

“Hey, I thought you of all people would appreciate it,” I cried.

“Dude,” Shay shook his head with obvious disappointment. “If I saw you on fire in the middle of the street, I’d still grab my phone before I got out of the car. But look. Sorry for the interruption and all, but you’re not going to fucking believe what’s going on.”

Seamus O’Flaherty looked like he hadn’t aged a day since he played bass with me in Reality Star. He carried himself like a man in his late forties, but there wasn’t a single wrinkle, blemish, or laugh line on his smooth, brown face. Not even a random grey hair on his scalp. He credited this to his Filipino heritage and said it was the same for his dad. Apparently, when men in his family turned sixty, it was like *boom!* Definitely sixty.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“So, I get this message from Donna Klopshoff over at Ridley Anders, and I think nothing of it because she works with Peter all the time. And she’s all, ‘Just give me a call when you have a chance.’ No worries, you know? So, I didn’t call her back until today.”



“Get out!” I said. “That’s some crazy shit.”

“No, no, no—hear me out. Turns out, Ridley is working with a guy who wants to buy ten acres of vineyard property in Coombsville, and this guy wants us to consult on the development. And you’ll never believe who it is.” Seamus placed his palms on the table and pushed his shoulders back, like he was about to announce the winner of Best Picture of The Year. “Brogan Prescott.”

“No way,” Remy said. “Are you serious?”

Never heard of the guy, but his name made Remy the closest thing to excited I’d seen since she won the Northern California Regional Mathalon in 2007, so I guess he was somebody.

“Who’s Brogan Prescott?” I asked.

“Oh, come on, Dad, really?” she replied. “4-D Games? *Tom Braxton: Beyond Vengeance*? You don’t remember that one?”

I did remember *Beyond Vengeance*. Remy had made me play against her in head-to-head combat mode for years. Mostly I remember my video-guts splaying across the TV screen as she liquefied me time and again with a rocket launcher. I tried not to take it personally.

“He sold 4-D Games about ten years ago for \$3.5 billion,” Seamus said. “Billion with a ‘B.’ He’s still Chief Imagination Officer, whatever the hell that means, but he’s got his hands in all sorts of things now, including restaurants—which is why I think he wants a winery. Did you guys eat already? Are we eating? I’m starving.” He grabbed one of the menus and started perusing it.

“Brogan Prescott,” I said. “Seriously, his name is Brogan?”

*Bro-gan*. Is his middle name Mandude?”

“Oh my God, Dad,” Remy muttered. “You’re being a child. He happens to have a ton of clout in the valley.”

“Well, I’ve never heard of him.”

“No, the *other* valley.” Remy’s shoulders vibrated like she was about to short circuit. “The Silicon Valley.”

“Donna didn’t bat an eye when I told her it was four hundred an hour and a twenty-thousand-dollar retainer,” Shay revealed.

Oh. *Ohhh*. Suddenly, this guy was my new best friend.

Before I could respond, Possibly Penny came back to the table. I ordered the steak frites, which Christophe would cook up for me whether it was on the menu that night or not. Shay ordered the special cassoulet after determining it was the most amount of food available in a single entree, and I waited to hear what vegan abomination Remy would order.

“I’m not eating,” she said.

“Honey, come on,” I insisted. “You drove all the way up here. You must be starving.”

“I’m not hungry,” she repeated.

Remy didn’t do passive aggressive. When she said, ‘I’m not hungry,’ it meant she wasn’t hungry.

“So, you said he’s only getting ten acres?” I asked. “With that kind of money, he could buy the Ponderosa Vineyard.”

“Nope, just the ten,” Shay said. “The Fogelson Vineyard.”

“Hank Fogelson’s place? I didn’t know he was selling.”

“Apparently so.”

That was heartbreaking to hear. The Fogelsons had been a fixture in Napa for generations, and Hank had four children. It wasn’t unusual for the children of vintners or farmers to seek their fortunes elsewhere, but typically at least one kid returned to the fold and took over the business. Then again, prime vineyard land had never been at such a premium, and maybe it was just the right time for the family to cash out.

“So, is the property already permitted for a winery? I know Hank only has the old house up there now,” I said.

“Well, this is all the stuff we need to go over,” Shay answered. “And, like, right now, because our meeting is tomorrow morning.”

More eye twitching. “Tomorrow? Dude, that’s my last full day off of work before the exam. I need that day. Every second of that day.”

“So, math.” Shay glared at me with his lawyer-y, You’re An Idiot look. “Four times our normal rate. That’s four times larger than one. What part of this am I not get getting across? Take the fucking exam next year.”

“Oh, Shay Money’s in the hizzy,” I said.

“Don’t make me call you a Sucker MC,” he warned.

I gasped. “You wouldn’t *dare!*”

Remy wasn't finding any of this amusing. She had her grandmother's disturbing ability to unleash generations of Catholic guilt with the single raising of an eyebrow.

"Look, it's a great gig for sure," I said. "But I have to take that exam next week. And I need to have an evening alone with Remy."

"It's alright, Dad," Remy said, grabbing her purse. "You and Uncle Shay stay here and talk."

Remy scooped Shay out of the booth, put on her coat, and leaned over to give me a peck on the cheek.

"Honey," I said sheepishly, why don't you stay and we'll –

"No." Her tone of finality was unnerving. "You need clients like Brogan Prescott. You get in with a network like that, it's life changing. G'nite, dad."

But I wasn't buying it. Well, I'm not sure if I wasn't buying it or if I felt like a dick for how things were going down. Either way, I stood up before she could get a few steps away.

"Remy, wait. Listen, both of you, none of this changes the fact that I need all day tomorrow to study for my sit."

Remy looked at me quizzically. "Well, it should change the fact. I thought the whole reason you were becoming a Master Sommelier is so you'll have the credentials to get the 'highest-paying, biggest-profile' wine jobs out there? Well, here it is – here's one right in your lap. And you're just going to say no to it?"

Sometimes Remy's logic was more infuriating than any emotional outburst could ever be.

"You don't understand," I groaned. "With my credentials, I'll get even more of these jobs."

Remy moved up close to me and gently squeezed my arm. "Oh, dad. Do they cheer when you pass the exam?"

She turned and made her way for the exit. I just stood there, watching, knowing that the appropriate response was still four-and-a-half minutes away.

"Did I fuck something up?" I didn't even notice that Shay had got up and was standing next to me. "It feels like I fucked something up."

"Nothing I probably didn't fuck up myself years ago," I sighed. "Hold on."

I sprinted for the exit, then paused on the sidewalk in the chilly autumn air, looking up and down the street for Remy. Finally, I saw her about a half block away, about to get in her car.

"Remy!" I called after her.

She looked around and saw me, then paused beside the open door. I caught up to her, opened my mouth to say something, but then stuck my hands in my pockets and stared at the ground. As a songwriter, I practiced for years to learn how to craft the right combination of words to express just how I felt. On top of that, I could choose from a nearly infinite vocabulary of sounds to augment my

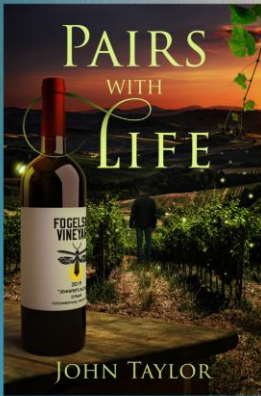
words, allowing me to elicit the exact emotional response I wanted from a listener. But standing here in the cold and dark, alone with the one person who meant more to me than anybody, words failed, and silence owned the moment.

I had to try. “So, look, about your mom—”

“My mother is dead.” Remy dropped the line with all the sentimentality of a formula in a spreadsheet cell, and I felt a piece of my heart shrivel up. “My mom is dead, and now the only person who can give me the truth is you.”

She closed her door and drove away. My baby girl. The only thing I’d ever done right.

The truth is a tricky thing. There was the truth that Remy was named after her mom’s favorite cognac, and then there was the Truth. I had hoped that the Truth would be a lot like the 2013 vintage of Napa cabernet: too powerful and concentrated to consume now but stick it in the cellar for thirty years and it’d be a lot more approachable. Apparently, that wasn’t going to be the case.



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