

One

Gray. For more than a month, the sky over St. Helena had explored the theme. Billowing gray clouds were followed by flat gray clouds, which were followed by gauzy gray clouds, granite-gray clouds, and steely gray clouds. A steady rain fell on the sodden earth, and thick gusts of wind whipped the hilltops, sending showers of sickle-shaped eucalyptus leaves twirling groundward. Vineyard workers layered rain gear over wool and fleece and slogged through the wet to examine the vines, sinking to their rubber-booted ankles in mud. And yet, there were those who did not object. In a town overrun by tourists much of the year, in a region with no shortage of hot days and blue skies, a rainy March was not necessarily unwelcome and many took secret pleasure in it. They stayed home, lit fires, read books, and listened to the gusts of temperamental winds and the patter of drops thrown against windows.

The wet weather broke suddenly. One morning a tender, head-high breeze glided down Main Street. The handful of early pedestrians out patrolling the sidewalks and lingering at corners turned to face it, letting it lift and toss their hair. Moments later, the sun emerged warm and bright. The Napa Valley basked in the first sunshine of spring. Within a week, the landscape was transformed. Tufts of canary-yellow oxalis blooms sprang up in all but the most disciplined yards, daffodils and tulips emerged from bare soil, and white blossoms popped out of the darkly naked branches of fruit trees. Fresh calla lilies stretched their slender torsos from between great green leaves and uncurled spirals of creamy white flesh.

On the night that Heidi Romero was murdered, Sunny McCoskey went to bed early. She had left the window open and a cold, wet breeze came in, lightly scented with apple blossoms from the tree in the backyard. Tiny white petals drifted in the bedroom window and settled on the hardwood floor.

Hours later the telephone woke her from a deep sleep. It was Andre Morales, the dark-haired, golden-eyed, supple-skinned local chef she'd recently begun to think of as her boyfriend, even if she hadn't actually called him that yet. He asked her to come out for a late, after-work drink with him and some of the others from the restaurant, and she said yes before she was really awake. After she hung up, she had no choice but to get out of bed and get dressed. It was no good introducing disappointment to a relationship so early on.

In the bathroom, she did her best to put a fresh face on an essentially exhausted head after a long day at work. Luckily the night would lend some cover. She ran her fingers through her short auburn hair, then brushed on eye shadow and mascara. Her green eyes were looking more lively. There was nothing she could do about her hands and arms, which were nicked and scarred with scrapes, cuts, and burns all the way to the elbows from years in the kitchen. Her nails were as short and plain as her palms were callused.

Half an hour later she was standing in the crowded front room of the Dusty Vine, staring at Andre Morales's shoulder blades as he pushed his way ahead of her to the bar. The Dusty Vine had endured a remodel in the last months. A former honky-tonk full of regulars and grit, it now boasted Italian furniture and Parisian lounge music. The regulars stubbornly persisted along side the crowd of would-be and actual hipsters. Andre handed her a beer and led the way to a fresh-looking group gathered in a far corner that greeted them with loud enthusiasm.

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After last call, they left her truck in the lot at the Dusty Vine and took Andre's old Porsche back to his place. An entourage followed.

When they arrived, he set the mood quickly. He put on music, lit candles, opened several bottles of wine, and assembled a station for making gin martinis. He emptied his cabinets of glasses as a stream of guests arrived, mostly members of the young, hard-working, and harder-playing crowd that kept the local gourmet establishments operating. These were the cooks, servers, maitre d's, and bartenders who worked in the business because the tips were good, the job physical, and the hours conducive to days free for school, sports, and artistic pursuits. They were in possession of their freedom, in concept if not reality, and there was an air of confidence about them. They had dreams and futures, and they knew the secrets behind the privileged experiences they sold. That eighteen-dollar salad was made from thirty-cents-worth of arugula and fennel, and the sixty-dollar bottle of wine could be had for twelve dollars at Safeway. They might not own the houses or drive the cars, but they drank better wine and ate better food than the people they served, and they did it without selling their souls. It was this sensation, Sunny suspected, that gave them the stamina to work all night and then go out.

Andre joked that he liked the way his friends looked next to his furniture. It was true that they were generally young and well-dressed and beautiful. They took up their places beside his modern lamps and on his minimalist, rectangular couches and ottomans as though they had been cast for the roles. A slender girl lay on his shaggy white rug with her Lucite heels and candy-colored toes in the air behind her. He looked around the conversation-filled room with satisfaction. "What a night. Sometimes it all comes together." He gave Sunny a kiss and headed for a group that hailed him.

Sunny filled her glass with a nameless white wine and

carried it around. Andre was talking to a couple that had recently taken over the woman's parents' winery and were in the process of revamping its branding and image. Sunny mingled. A woman she knew slightly from various food-related events introduced her to the man she was with. The three of them spoke for several minutes, then were separated by another friend's arrival. Sunny killed some time with a guy who handled PR at a big winery where the wine was not as good as it used to be. He went to refill his glass and she lingered, wondering what next. Across the room, Andre was engaged in an animated discussion with two slick-looking guys she'd never met. The clock on the kitchen wall said two-twenty. Her social buzz was waning. It had, in fact, bottomed out and come to a complete standstill. She scanned the room for a familiar face. The only person she recognized was a girl from Andre's restaurant who waited tables. She was being chatted up by a guy with a goatee and a thick chain hanging from his belt loop. Sunny put her glass on the kitchen counter and walked down the hall to the room where everyone had left their bags and jackets. She moved swiftly, without thinking, collecting her wrap and purse and letting herself out the backdoor almost before she decided to do so. She trotted down the driveway like a fugitive slipping away from a guard.

Outside, a fine mist chilled the air. Shivering in the cold, she walked to the end of the driveway and sat down on the low stone wall that ran up to it. Muffled music and laughter came from the house. St. Helena was not exactly Manhattan. It was not going to be easy to find a cab. She rummaged in her purse for her cell phone, which returned her button pushing with an oblivious blank gaze. She had forgotten to recharge it again. She looked back at the house and its rich cache of functional telephones. Ahead lay a cold night and a dark country road. A lone streetlight cast a fuzzy dome of light in the distance.

Even if she went back inside and called, she would be lucky to reach anyone. There were two cab companies in St. Helena. At this hour, she would be lucky if there was a car on duty. They would

take forever to get here. She could walk home faster. Yes, it was dark and she was dressed for a booty call not a hike, but unless she wanted to go back to the party and wait for Andre to extricate himself from his guests, the quickest route home and into her soft bed was a brief, bracing journey on foot. Sunny started to walk.

It could have been worse. She had almost worn the pointy alligator heels, until she remembered the stiletto-eating gaps in the rustic plank floor at the Dusty Vine. Instead, she'd chosen a wispy pair of ballet flats. The rest of the outfit was equally insubstantial. There was a shirt consisting of two puny layers of colored mesh, a pair of light jeans, and a pashmina scarf. Still, she might have been wearing a skirt, for example, or a skimpy dress. She pulled the scarf around her shoulders, tucked the ends into the top of her jeans, and dug her hands into her pockets.

The important part was she could breath again. To walk out into the darkness alone like a social outcast made her want to leap with joy. There were night people and there were day people, and she was a day person. If she sometimes stayed up all night, it was not in order to be in the darkness or with the party people, but because sleep was taking second place to some project or concern. Her favorite time of day was sunrise, and what she liked best about the night was the quiet, not the nightlife.

Her eyes grew accustomed to the darkness. The party mumble receded and all she heard were her shoes scuffing softly on the pavement and the buzz and click of night bugs. She saw only vineyard and trees, the road's white line, and above, hazy stars. The road ran straight as a surveyor's line in either direction with vineyard on both sides. No cars passed. A sliver moon sat halfway up the sky with Venus like a beauty mark below it.

In the darkness, the landscape seemed to expand. The span of road that could be driven in a few seconds without attracting any special notice stretched out on foot and filled the senses. Roadside plants gave off their fragrances. She passed through each of them like scenery. A wild rose, a musky oak, the lush grasses near a

drainage ditch. It was hard to believe downtown St. Helena was only a few miles away.

It seemed to take a very long time to reach the streetlight. Eventually she resorted to counting her footsteps to make the distance pass more quickly. The road was so straight she could close her eyes and count to one hundred without straying far from the white line, and she did so several times before she reached the light at last. As she passed underneath it, it went out with a faint pop. She looked up at the shrinking glow of filament. There were various theories to explain this sort of phenomenon. Catelina Alvarez, the Portuguese grandmother who lived down the street from Sunny throughout her childhood and who taught her most of what she knew about cooking, claimed it was a person's aural glow that did it. Whatever the cause, the loss of the solitary light infused the darkness with more power and it pulled at her, as if she would be sucked into its mystery.

Feeling suddenly alone and more than a little timid, she began to wonder whether walking home was really such a good idea after all. There had been more reasonable options. Andre's mountain bike was in the garage, for example. If she had really wanted her predawn exercise, she could have borrowed it and been home by now. Or she could have borrowed his car, asked one of his friends for a ride, or gone to sleep in one of the bedrooms. There was no excuse for her present predicament, she thought, feeling foolish. She stopped to consider turning around. What was she doing wandering around in the middle of the night? It would take too long to go back now. She would do just as well to finish what she'd started. Her mood soured. She went on, feeling both afraid of the ominous darkness and ridiculous for being afraid. For a thirty-two-year-old woman to be intimidated by a short walk at night in a familiar place was simply ridiculous. She mused on the darkness, which was a natural part of existence and served to liberate humans from the controlled productivity of daylight. Darkness meant freedom from work, obligation, decorum. Her spirits rose with the thought that

humans, herself included, had grown excessively attached to the light, and had lost some wilder part of themselves because of it, and that in venturing out into the night she was recapturing part of this lost magic.

She walked on and her thoughts turned to Andre Morales, a recent and welcome addition to her life. She would call him when she got home. Maybe he wouldn't have noticed she was gone yet. They were still in the very early stages of their romance, and he was no doubt still evaluating her character, as she was his. Tonight's performance would do little to inspire him. There would be a deduction from her account, that was certain. The only question was how much. He would probably assume it was part of a breezy streak in her personality. That would be a mistake. Sunny was anything but breezy. She'd always been accused of being too serious. Neurotic, possibly, by some people's standards, but not breezy.

She stepped around the flattened carcass of a snake, long dead. Andre may as well know the truth sooner than later, which was that she did not always give social gatherings with new, interesting people priority over a solid night's sleep. The idea was deeply subversive in Andre's world, where solitude and sleep held about as much appeal as sit-ups and vitamins. To reject a party in order to go to bed was the act of a demented mind, or worse, a dullard. For Sunny, sleep made the difference between the joyful execution of the next day's duties and a pained, amnesiac slog through them. For Andre, sleep foreshadowed death, and was the last recourse for a night, to be indulged only if nothing better was in the offing.

He and his staff could work until midnight, close the restaurant, drink and smoke until dawn, and still get up at eight. How did they do it? It was the same at other restaurants. The staff would close the door on the last customer and the night would begin. They possessed a social stamina Sunny could only admire. She wondered how late they would stay tonight. Even the most hearty among them had to go home to bed eventually. With that

thought, she began to feel conspicuous. Anyone headed to Highway 29 from Andre's house, and that would be almost everyone, would have to drive right past her. They would certainly wonder what she was doing out there alone. To walk beside the road, especially at night, and particularly alone, was practically a criminal act. Only motorists in distress and deviants walked on roads at night. All decent, sensible, prosperous people drove cars, or at least rode bicycles. It was part of the modern tyranny of efficiency. Anything faster had to be better, and to choose a slower method of doing almost anything was tantamount to a declaration of mental instability. No one would appreciate the truth, that she simply wanted to be alone in the quiet on her way home, and even liked being outside in the open air. She tried to concoct a more convincing explanation in case a carload of Andre's friends pulled up beside her and asked if she needed a ride. It would be embarrassing. The simplest solution was to jog. The less time she spent inviting the scrutiny of passing cars, the better.

Jogging turned out to be a good idea. It banished the night chill and pushed the shadow fears to the edges of her mind. She settled into the new pace. Soon she could make out the white lettering of the stop sign in the distance where the road ended at Fir Hill Drive. From there it wasn't far to Madrona, then Hudson, then Adams, and finally the cottage on Adelaide with its plump white duvet and clean white sheets. Ah, bed. Bed! Soon she would be home and neatly tucked in.

Madrona ran as arrow-straight as Fir Hill, like most of the valley roads between the checkerboard of vineyards. From Madrona, the outline of far ridges of the Coast Range were visible to the east and west. Nearer were more vineyards, their vines lined up like ghost soldiers. She counted her steps in sets of twenty until she lost track of the number of sets. The white line lay thickly on the pavement like a satisfying glaze of sugar on gingerbread.

She'd been jogging down Madrona for some time when she heard a faint new sound. She stopped to listen, holding her breath so

she could hear. She heard the rumble of an engine, and a moment later the crunch of tires moving slowly across gravel. A hundred yards behind her lay the turnoff to Vedana Vineyards, marked by a mailbox and fieldstone pillars. The winery stood back the same distance or more from the main road. She searched the darkness. The outline of the cluster of stone buildings was just visible. From behind them, a light-colored vehicle emerged and turned onto the gravel lane coming toward her. The driver didn't have his lights on. She watched. Why didn't they have their lights on? Didn't they notice? Should she wave them down and tell them? They would figure it out eventually. Besides, what if the driver was not the sort of person she wanted to meet in the middle of nowhere in the middle of the night? She looked around. A leafy shrub stood next to the fence a few feet away.

There would have been plenty of time to move behind the shrub gracefully if she had not stepped halfway on a rock and stumbled when she jumped across the drainage ditch. As she got up, the vehicle, a white pickup truck, pulled out of the driveway and turned toward her. She was standing in plain view when the driver switched on his lights, blinding her as the truck accelerated past. She turned and stared after it. All she could see was its taillights, one more orange than the other, probably a replacement. They shrank away with the sound of the engine and silence took hold of the night again.

She stood in the road, staring after the truck. Something about it struck her as odd. Why had the driver waited so long to turn on his headlights? And what was he doing at the winery at this hour? Except for a pair of flood lights illuminating a few sections of landscaping, the winery stood in darkness. The stone buildings looked as stoic and somber as always, and the massive oak in the courtyard stood with its usual air of permanence, its great spread of limbs forming a wide canopy. Except that it was not exactly the same. Something out of place swayed from its lowest limb. At this distance, the length of a football field, it was hard to discern the

shape. All she could make out was a pale form twisting from the limb like a punching bag. The sight gave her a chill. It reminded her of a deer hung up for cleaning. She thought of what it could be. It was difficult to make out more than a rough outline from so far away. It could be a swing caught at a strange angle, or a piñata hung up for a party, or a kite. It could be any number of harmless objects caught or hung up in the tree.

She walked back to the driveway leading to Vedana Vineyards. A sign next to one of the stone pillars read, "No public tastings. Tours by appointment only." She stared at the distant shape hanging from the tree and thought of the white truck. Vineyard surrounded the winery with its bare vines like uniform markers in a vast graveyard. She pulled her scarf closer and started down the gravel road.