

MORE THAN A WOMAN

A Novel

by

Alex Abella

To Annie.

Amor con amor se paga.

CHAPTER I

Early afternoon, mid-August 1999 in Santa Margarita, California. Sticky breezes, the dull buzzing of insects. Down the sightline from the hotel grounds, above the Macayamas Range, a handful of inky clouds gather as though deciding to pay a visit.

From the corner of the bar I can see your mother in her short mauve dress, bridal bouquet in hand, still flush with the thrill of her second beginning--Miranda Benoit, neé Ferri, direct descendant of the founding patriarch of Santa Margarita, is now the wife of John Burnham, winemaker to some of the best vineyards in the valley. Miranda beams and hugs her friends, while John stands stiffly a few feet away in his one and only suit, embarrassed by her show of affection. You, Annie, run around the terrace in your flower girl dress, chasing somebody's tow-haired little boy.

Jack Irving, the realtor, sidles over to me, chewing on a crab cake, his short beard stained with pinkish remoulade.

"Hey, Sandy." He waves at the bartender for another glass of the house Viognier. "Wonderful wedding, isn't it?"

I nod, keeping my feelings to myself. As always, Jack is casing the room, in case there is a chance he can talk to somebody else more important or, better yet, someone with a

property he can list. Buyers are plenty, land is dear.

"How's the old rag?" he asks.

"OK," I reply, sipping my San Pellegrino. "Lots of city people over for the summer."

"Anybody need my services?"

"Is there a referral fee?"

"Sorry, no can do. Against company policy."

"What policy? You own the damn place."

"Rules, Sandy. We all have to follow rules. Like Bob Dylan says, to live outside the law you must be honest."

Cupidity exhausted, he moves to the other constant of a realtor's life in Santa Margarita. "You think it's going to rain? Office pool says it's going to be just as bad this summer."

I peer at the roiling sky. A year ago, the harvest was cut down by a series of warm downpours in late August which caused the grapes to ripen prematurely and burst with watery juice. The best wine in the world produced by state of the art scientific methods wasted by clouds that didn't know their rightful place and time.

"What's the kitty?" I ask.

"Five hundred bucks. Some guy on the radio was saying it's all because of global warming, the Earth is taking her revenge from the pollution and whatnot we've done to her."

"I never knew you were an Earth First! kind of guy."

"You got the wrong farmer, buddy," says Jack, downing his wine in one gulp. "I belong to the Jack First! group. But those guys over there are plenty worried."

He jerks his chin at about a dozen guests, the working growers and winery owners, already hoisting their cell phones as they scan the sky, wondering whether to call in a crew to pick as much as possible or wait and hope the storm will head elsewhere.

"When they get jumpy, I get the jitters," says Jack. "It's their land I'm selling, babe, and they know better than anyone what makes all this worthwhile. Those guys are our backbone."

"Your compassion moves me to tears."

"It's all business. Money talks, blah, blah. By the way, I just opened escrow on the old Ferri estate."

My ears perk up. This could be a news item, if the buyer is a big enough name, a media mogul or Internet wonder boy, ready to rusticate among the trellises.

"Miranda's old place? La Sombrosa? The place has been shut down for years. Who's buying the old hulk?"

"Some corporate guy out of the Far East. Wincorp was asking an outrageous amount but this guy didn't bat an eyelash."

"How much?"

"Eight million. And that's for the front ten acres on

Highway 61. The back twenty is an extra forty."

"That's some commission."

"Don't forget my ex-wives. I'll be lucky if I clear a mill this year. Gotta go, there's old man Reinhardt, I want to talk to him about his place up in Alexander Valley."

Jack puts his glass down, raring to round up his latest cash bull. I grab him by the arm.

"What's the name of the mystery Midas?"

"The name is Robertson. Roger Robertson. His outfit is called Pasado Enterprises. Cute, huh? Gotta go. You owe me."

"You know where to find me."

He wades into the crowd, accosting the short, cherubic looking owner of Whitbread Publishing who bought a forty square mile valley as his private reserve two years ago. I finish my water, wave goodbye at your mom and hustle down to the Register. This item will definitely make the top of my next column.

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My editor, Dick Bronson, is less than enthused on reading

the lede.

"Who cares about La Sombrosa?"

"History is important to our readers, Dick. They still remember when you could go to Sloan's and refill your prescription, instead of your decaffeinated nonfat chai latte with a twist."

Dick glares at me. He came over from San Francisco to refashion the Santa Margarita Register into a classier kind of paper along the lines of the New York Observer--taut, wise and ever so hip. Every day I wonder how much longer he'll tolerate my penchant for looking back. I was only seven when my dad moved the family to The City--as every Northern Californian calls San Francisco--but I still remember the cow town that was Santa Margarita.

Dick tosses my smudged pages back; I am the only writer in the paper who still writes on a Royal typewriter, everyone else has succumbed to the lure of word processors with their little lines of type that magically appear and disappear like chugging trains in fields of ether.

"Find another lede," he says, returning to his pesto, mozzarella, and arugula foccacia sandwich.

"There's nothing wrong with 'Old Mammoth Bought by Mammon.'"

"Sandy, nobody knows who Mammon was."

"Well, you know, it's in the Bible. You cannot serve both..."

"I know what it means and you know what it means but it don't mean diddly to our readers. Wake up and smell the Franklins, baby. The pursuit of the mighty dollar is and has always been this valley's only goal. People didn't come down here to plant grapes because they were proto-hippies. They planted grapes to make money and there's nothing wrong with that. Stop being holier than thou and fix it."

"There is something called quality of life."

"You are so elitist. I'm giving you an assignment. Interview the guy who just bought the old Ferri pile and ask him how he feels about money. How did he get it and why did he buy the place."

"The guy's not even in town yet."

"You ever hear of a phone? Call him. And change that lede."

My hands tremble with barely contained rage. It would be so easy to wrap my fingers around his pudgy little neck and...

"If you say so, boss."

"Now you're talking."

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A few days after your mother's wedding the man who calls himself Roger Robertson flies his private jet in from the Caribbean, picks up his Ferrari Testarossa at Napa Airport and races up the darkened, winding road to Santa Margarita in the middle of the night, the dim reflection of the past his only beacon. He drives up to La Sombrosa and parks under the towering oak tree planted by Benedetto Ferri at the turn of the last century.

Holding in his hands the key that Jack Irving mailed him, Roger Robertson swiftly unlocks the mansion's massive oak door, which creaks open on its rusty hinges. His steps resound like bullets in the vestibule. He stops, turns on a light, which shines on empty halls and corridors. Excited, he heads back outside and stands on the desolate porch, surveying acres of withering vines under a yellow summer moon. All his, at last.

He stands a while in the darkness, breathing in the smell of oaks and loam, the hint of tar from the nearby highway, the wisps of a sea breeze sliding in through the Pineville grade. He steps off the porch, crosses the gravel driveway, then runs down the rows of vines, his hands held out to the sides, touching the raisin clusters on the crippled trellises, a madman in the moonlit night.

Returning to the house, Robertson picks up a smooth white rock from the driveway, holds it in his hand, feeling its heft, its warmth, its untold stories, then hustles back inside. He marches into the long empty ballroom. An ornate gilt mirror still hangs over the fireplace and in the fraction of a second that it takes him to register his reflection, his features distorted by the accumulation of so many years of unresolved feelings, of longing and of rage, he hurls the rock at the mirror, smashing it into long shiny shards which fall with an awful clatter on the dark wooden floor.

