

PANDORA'S BOTTLE



A novel by

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in vino veritas
(In wine, there is truth.)
—Latin proverb

“What’s in a name?”
—William Shakespeare

PROLOGUE

THE BID



ANYONE WATCHING SY HAMPTON would think he had never been to a wine auction before. Sweat was beading on his high, rounded forehead, and he was having difficulty keeping the fingernails of his right hand from drumming a steady tattoo up and down the white plastic paddle that rested on his knee. The catalog he clutched in his left hand was so crumpled and shiny that it looked like it had spent a night or two under his pillow, which, he would have been forced to admit, it had. In fact, he had been carrying the glossy book with him everywhere, ever since he first learned the bottle had come up for sale.

An involuntary groan escaped Sy's lips, causing the elderly woman sitting next to him to look over. Quickly disguising the outburst as a cough, Sy smiled apologetically, at the same time taking in the woman's salmon bouclé Escada suit, multi-carat diamond earrings, and heavy necklace of what were either garnets or exqui-

site dark rubies. From the way she inclined her head toward him with an indulgent smile, he could tell she was dismissing him as any threat to her plans. He glanced down at the page to which her pristine catalog lay open, and his heart gave a tiny jolt as he realized that her plans were identical to his.

In truth, Sy Hampton attended Shoreham's wine auctions regularly. In the twenty years since the auction house opened its International Fine and Rare Wines Department, he'd come to prefer it to Sotheby's or Christie's. The two larger houses often fought so hard over coveted bottles that sellers got fed up and turned to Shoreham's, which had slowly and steadily built up its name and reputation almost before the other houses knew what was happening. So while Sy still visited Sotheby's and Christie's when something really spectacular came up, it was the tuxedoed waiters at Shoreham's handing out complimentary glasses of champagne who knew him by name. He was only surprised he'd never spotted the old woman before. On any other day, at any other auction, he would have relished giving her a run for her money, but there was too much riding on this particular event—on this particular lot—for him to savor the thrill of competitive bidding. He hadn't felt this internally agitated since his first big leveraged buyout, twenty years ago. The sangfroid he had developed in the ensuing years starting down recalcitrant CEOs and cajoling millions out of frigid bankers was in frustratingly short supply today.

It occurred to him that he might press this maddening breach of composure to his advantage. Let the dowager underestimate him. Let her take him for a nervous novice who couldn't possibly have enough money to compete with her. Let her drop her guard so that when he moved in for the kill, she'd be so blindsided that she'd forget to raise her paddle. His partner, Warren Sage, was an expert at sucker punch negotiating, and Sy liked to think he was still capable of learning from those around him.

With a sudden move, he took up his catalog, which fell open easily, as the binding had long since broken. He gave an ostentatious shiver that wasn't entirely faked as his fingers caressed the color

photograph of the 1787 Château Lafite, reputed to have been part of Thomas Jefferson's private collection. He traced the small golden crescent on the top right-hand side of the label and imagined that he could see the telltale initials Th. J. etched in the dark opaque glass underneath it. Two ex-wives and the spiraling markets had taken a bite out of Sy's fortune, but he still had millions at his disposal, and if the old woman forced him to drop one on the Lafite, he would. Money was meant to be spent, wine was meant to be drunk, and he had never—*ever*—wanted a bottle of wine as much as he wanted this one.

Sy Hampton was an oenophile, and while he didn't flatter himself that his was a remarkable palate, he had listened, smelled, tasted, and learned. For almost as long as he'd known anything about wine, he'd known about—and fantasized about—this legendary bottle. He'd learned of its existence from François, the elderly sommelier who had served him the first bottle of wine he'd ever ordered. It was 1983, and Sy, fresh out of Columbia Business School, had landed his first job at Randall Ventures, a coup he had accomplished by waylaying Sumner Randall at a cocktail party and refusing to let the financier through to the bar until he'd been promised employment.

Sy had taken himself out to a fancy little restaurant on the Upper East Side called L'Étoile to celebrate. He had never ordered a bottle of wine before. As the eldest child of a hardware store manager and a substitute teacher, simply dining out had been enough of a treat; a luxury like wine was off the table, so to speak. Buoyed by his good fortune and envisioning a moneyed future, Sy had admitted to François that he was ignorant about wine, and the sommelier had happily responded by giving him a primer. Sy repaid the sommelier's kindness by returning frequently to L'Étoile until the restaurant closed several years later. As Sy's palate became stimulated and his spending power increased, he purchased, with François's advice, increasingly expensive and adventurous wines.

On his third or fourth visit to L'Étoile, the sommelier had told him the story of the fabled Pichard Lafites. Legend had it that

among the wines Jefferson purchased on a voyage to Bordeaux in 1787 was a single bottle that had been the subject of an experiment by the famous winemaker Nicolas Pierre de Pichard, owner of Château Lafite, or Lafitte, as it was spelled at the time. Lafite, derived from the Gascon *la hite*, or “small hill,” had already become one of the most important wine-producing estates in Pauillac, the greatest wine-growing region of Bordeaux. The 1787 vintage was an exceptional one, and Pichard selected the best barrel to experiment with. Using a process called extended maceration, Pichard kept the skins, seeds, and stems in with the fermenting wine for a biblical forty days, rather than the customary seven to fourteen. The added exposure to the adjunct parts of the grape increased the level of tannins and phenols, the antioxidants that act as a preservative in wine. It would take many decades for the harsh chemicals to polymerize and precipitate out, but the result would be a smooth, well-integrated wine that Pichard intended to last into the next century and beyond. A later discovery of writings by Pichard referred to *la chose secrète*—some additional secret ingredient he added to the wine—which only fanned the frenzied imaginations of oenophiles the world over.

True or not, Pichard’s claims to viticultural immortality were not looked upon kindly by the Republicans, whose mission it was to equalize everyone, providing additional justification for his execution by guillotine during the Reign of Terror. The bottles in the twenty-five cases from this barrel yield had been marked by a crescent, etched in the glass beside the vintage and the château. Thomas Jefferson, who had become obsessed with Bordeaux wines, had visited the region and Château Lafite in 1787. He ordered a case of wine from Pichard, but the winemaker replied that he had none left for sale, and for many years, it was assumed that Jefferson had never received any bottles from the 1787 Lafite vintage, let alone from Pichard’s experimental barrel.

But among the papers that included Pichard’s reference to *la chose secrète* was a copy of a bill to Thomas Jefferson for a single bottle of the 1787 vintage, dated several months after his initial,

rejected application for an entire case. Wine historians could only assume that Jefferson had received it, but until the actual bottle came to light and its provenance was traced, nobody knew whether or not it still existed—if it ever had—and whether it had come from Pichard's experimental yield.

It had. A French family named Marquet had revealed the existence of the bottle, had it verified, and offered it up for auction. Thomas Jefferson's initials were etched just under the signifying crescent, indicating that he had, in fact, owned it. As far as anyone knew, this was the only bottle remaining from Pichard's experimental barrel.

And it might still be drinkable.

Sy Hampton had always been a history buff, and when history and wine converged, his gooseflesh became engaged. From the moment he heard old François's story, he swore to himself that, should Jefferson's fabled 1787 Pichard Lafite ever materialize, he would buy it and drink it. Wine had become his passion, but this bottle was his obsession.

He closed his eyes and, for the umpteenth time, imagined uncorking the wine that Thomas Jefferson could have drunk, but didn't. Just the thought of sampling a viable or even partially viable Château Lafite dating from the French Revolution was enough to make him tipsy.

The old woman next to Sy cleared her throat in an unmistakable bid for attention. Sy opened his eyes. She dipped her snowy head toward the open catalog in his lap. Like most bottles, which were intended to mature in damp, musty wine cellars, Jefferson's bore no label, only the etchings, but the present château, Lafite-Rothschild, had provided a beautifully calligraphed one for the occasion with an embossed gold crescent.

"You're not bidding on the Jefferson Lafite, are you?" she asked, eyeing him skeptically.

He arranged his face into a hangdog expression and nodded eagerly.

She pursed her plum red lips smugly, gave a little sniff, and

returned her attention to her own catalog.

His dislike for her compounded instantly, and not just because the Escada suit reminded him of something that Marianne, the first and nastier of his ex-wives, would wear. Although Sy knew how far he would go to get the wine, he had no idea how far the dowager would. Clearly, she knew the history of the bottle, and from the way she was dressed, Sy guessed she could make it a very expensive day for him. So be it. He had lived with the promise of this bottle for so many years that he felt it was his already. It was inconceivable to him that he might leave Shoreham's today without it.

Sy glanced around the sleek, understated elegance of the Park Room. It was more crowded than usual, with over a hundred people gathered for the two-hour evening session, rather than the usual fifty or so, but there were more than 450 lots for sale, and several other notable ones besides the Jefferson Lafite. Sy scanned the long mahogany banquettes on either side of the room, each manned by three Shoreham's employees at telephones. That was the variable, he knew. The Lafite was listed roughly three-quarters of the way through as lot 345. He'd have plenty of time before then to size up the competition he could see. But who would be bidding anonymously by phone? And was the auctioneer commissioned to bid on behalf of some unnamed collector?

He spotted several familiar faces, including Peter Blomgard, his only remaining friend from his early days at Randall Ventures. He and Peter had a long history of slugging it out at Shoreham's over coveted parcels, with each maintaining that his lifetime tally was higher than the other's. But Sy knew that the Lafite was out of Peter's range. No, Peter was likely there for one of the two *Domaine de la Romanée-Conti* lots: the rare case of magnums of *Grand Cru 1969* or the jeroboam of *La Tâche 1962 Côte de Nuits*. He guessed the *Grand Cru* would go for somewhere between twenty and forty grand, and the *La Tâche* anywhere from forty to fifty. Ordinarily, Sy would have delighted in making his friend sweat over either of those, but not today. Blomgard could have them.

A gentle tinkling of Debussy interrupted his thoughts, and the

dowager retrieved a jewel-encrusted cell phone from the inside pocket of a large brown leather tote bag.

“Hello? It’s about to start.” She glanced sideways at Sy, who was purposely doing a poor job of pretending not to listen. “Oh yes, I think I’ll be able to get it. I’ll try not to go over three. I doubt I’ll have to.” She snapped the phone shut, replaced it in her tote bag, smoothed her snowy coif, and settled back in her chair as Antony Farrell took the podium.

With his ruddy cheeks and shock of golden hair, Antony Farrell, senior director of Shoreham’s International Fine and Rare Wines Department, looked like an overgrown British schoolboy, which he more or less was. But Sy knew his looks were deceiving. Farrell was Cambridge-educated, whip-smart, and wildly ambitious. They had met at several wine events and had dined together once at Sy’s home, where Sy had taken great pleasure in serving several prestige bottles from his cellar.

Farrell had been duly impressed both with the wine (which included a 1982 Pétrus) and Sy’s state-of-the-art cellar. Sy had converted the entire basement level of his town house on East Sixty-fourth Street into a climate-controlled Mediterranean-style cellar and tasting room, complete with tile floor, marble table, wrought-iron grilles, stone archways, and a complex racking and filing system. It was the one part of the house he had refused to let Marianne design. He’d had to trade away the rest of it, including his study (the one room he had bothered to redecorate after they divorced), in order to get the basement. But it had been worth it, especially to see an expert like Farrell trying not to salivate at the sight of it.

Farrell spotted Sy almost immediately and gave a barely perceptible nod in his direction. Sy glanced sideways at the dowager, but she was staring fixedly at her catalog and seemed not to have noticed. It wouldn’t be long before she realized whom she was up against. He consulted his Vacheron Constantin Great Explorers watch, which he considered his good-luck charm. He’d purchased the limited edition \$70,000 watch the morning he and Warren

closed their first billion-dollar deal. Five o'clock.

It was time.

Farrell pounded the hammer and the auction began.

"Lot number one! A lovely Château Margaux 1983. Do I have three? Three it is, and three-five? Three-five! Four from me—four-four against me, I'm out, it's in the room at four-four, do I have five? Five! Five-five? Yes? Last chance . . . selling at five-five . . . all done at five-five to . . . sorry, sir, can't see your paddle number . . . sold to paddle number 107! Do you want another? There's one more in the lot . . . come now, take it off my hands, won't you? Yes? Good. Throw a party!"

Despite Farrell's rapid-fire patter, the minutes turtled by. There were quite a number of parcels that, under normal circumstances, would have piqued Sy's interest, but he felt it prudent to remain invisible until the critical moment.

"Lot number 146! Six magnums of Château Mouton Rothschild 1945, do I hear thirty?"

Sy watched longingly as those passed to a young Asian couple in the front row for two hundred grand, and he was pleased for Peter Blomgard when he scooped the '62 La Tâche out from under them at fifty-two.

"Lot number 212!" called Farrell. "A case of 1961 Châteaux Margaux . . ."

The dowager excused herself, took a small purse from her capacious tote bag, and squeezed past Sy. Like Sy, she had yet to place a single bid. As he watched her salmon bouclé back recede, he took the opportunity to scan the room once more, and his eyes fell on the wooden banquettes. The telephone traffic had been fairly quiet so far, with most of the anonymous bidding filtering through the young blond operator on the end, whose name was Angela. Maybe they were all waiting for the Lafite. He was glad this auction wasn't online as well. The muted phones would bring him competition enough.

Sy glanced down suddenly at the old woman's tote bag. A terribly wonderful and devious thought had just occurred to him, and

he found himself acting on it before his conscience could voice an objection. He couldn't do anything about the anonymous phone participants, but there might be something he could do about the bidding bidy . . .

Keeping his gaze on the door, he bent down and extracted her cell phone from the pocket just inside her tote bag. He quickly scrolled through the options screen until it displayed her phone number, which, even as his hands trembled, his easy head for figures absorbed. Then he scrolled to the alerts menu and made a slight alteration to her ringtone and volume level. Suppressing a chuckle at his choice, he replaced her phone in her tote bag. He pulled out his iPhone and added her number to his Favorites, temporarily replacing his office number. Although his heart seemed to be skipping every other beat, he was staring innocently and intently at Antony Farrell by the time the dowager returned.

"Lot number 239! Two jeroboams of 1961 Haut-Brion. Do I have five?"

The remaining lots sped by in a blur, and then, in a flash, the Lafite was up.

"Lot 345. A very special bottle, of course," Farrell purred. "One of the Jefferson Bordeaux, Château Lafite 1787. That's right, this wine dates back to the French Revolution, and legend has it that it could still be drinkable." Farrell paused for effect. "If it is, it would be a treasure beyond imagining."

Sy swallowed hard and gripped his white plastic paddle.

"Do I hear thirty thousand to start the bidding?"

Sy's hand shot up.

"Thirty-five. Do I hear thirty-five?"

The dowager's hand was up almost as fast. Almost immediately, two other people in the front of the room emerged as serious contenders, a stocky fellow in a rugby shirt who looked no more than twenty-five—it was harder and harder to tell who had money and who didn't—and an older, professorial-looking gentleman. Among them, the dowager, Sy, and several phone bidders, the price was driven up to \$300,000 within minutes.

“Three, do I have three-five? Three-five to the lady. Three-ten? Three-ten, Sy. Three-fifteen, Angela on the phone.”

And on it went, until the kid in the rugby shirt dropped out at \$350,000, the professor dropped out at \$380,000, and two of the three phone bidders hung up at \$400,000. The mood in the room was palpably tense. It had become a three-way race, and the on-lookers looked dazed as the three hands—Sy’s, Angela’s, and the dowager’s—chased one another into the air in quick succession.

“Do I have four-fifty?”

The dowager had brought the bidding to \$445,000. Sy could have jumped in, but Angela was frowning over the receiver, and he felt certain her bidder was about to drop out. Angela looked at Farrell, shook her head, and set down the phone.

It was between Sy and the dowager now, as he had known from the start it would be.

His desire for the bottle had exploded with a new, unexplained intensity. Somewhere he had crossed the line between wanting the bottle and needing it with a desperation he didn’t fully understand, and could not have articulated if asked. He suddenly felt that his whole future depended on his owning this wine, and that terrible things would happen if he lost it. Had he been able to think rationally, he would have admitted that this degree of blinding need was out of proportion with the bottle’s actual worth, but in the moment, all he knew was that he would stop at nothing to get it.

The sweat was running down the side of his neck onto his collar, but he didn’t care. He wasn’t using his right hand for any purpose other than to lift his paddle in the air, which he did again and again whenever the dowager brought hers down.

At \$485,000, he decided he’d had enough. His iPhone was still in the palm of his left hand. He pulled up his Favorites, tapped the number, and waited.

The “Marseillaise” suddenly blared at top volume from the dowager’s brown tote bag, and the whole room gave a collective gasp of distaste. Sy thrust his paddle into the air and upped his own bid by \$5,000, then \$5,000 more, while the dowager rummaged in

her bag, trying to silence her phone. Sy gazed purposefully at Antony Farrell and raised his paddle three more times.

Farrell gave a slight nod in Sy's direction and pattered, "Five-ten . . . selling at five-ten . . ."

The dowager's white head shot up from her bag.

"Five hundred ten thousand dollars . . . going once, twice . . ."

She blinked her small blue eyes, unsure whether to bid further. Farrell let her indecision hang for a second longer, then brought the hammer down.

"All done at \$510,000 to number three! Well done, Sy. You'll have to tell us how it tastes!"

The room broke into restrained applause. The dowager was dumbfounded. She stared at Sy and then down at the jewel-encrusted phone in her hand, the realization of his treachery taking hold.

"You son of a bitch," she seethed, her plummy lips writhing.

Sy shrugged as he rose from his seat. The room was coming back into focus, and his composure was returning to normal, even if his heart rate wasn't.

"All's fair in love and wine," he said with a wink.

He returned his empty champagne glass to the table at the back of the room, where the red-haired young man who had served him smiled and said, "Nicely done, Mr. Hampton."

Sy thought, not unkindly, that the amount of money he'd just dropped on the Jefferson Lafite was probably more than the waiter would see in his lifetime. Ah well, nothing he could do about that. Sy turned back to the room, and with a grateful nod to Farrell and a prayer of thanks heavenward, he dabbed his glistening brow and left to arrange for delivery of his prize.