



MURDER HE TASTED

Or "Death in the Desert"

by Charles M. Bear Dalton



It's Monday. 10:00am. A dame walks into my office. Short dress, denim jacket, tricolor cow-girl boots. Intriguing. And she's packing. A 750ml of "So Rare" Cabernet Sauvignon 2008. She tells me it won a Champion buckle at the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo International Wine Competition. It clicks into place. The boots, the denim ...

"100% Cabernet." she says, interrupt-

ing my thoughts.

"20 months in a 100% new oak." she says before I can answer.

"Rutherford" she says.

"Actually Bella Oaks vineyard that Heitz isn't getting anymore." she says.

"Really?" I ask, finally getting a word in.

"Really," she answers, defiantly.

"Serve it up." I say.

"OK" she says.

She pulled the cork. It popped like a .38 snub-nose fired through a feather pillow. She pours the wine into my glass. A drop falls to my desktop blotter - a stray droplet of scarlet blood. As it splatters, I think of DNA evidence. Is it really Bella Oaks? Is it really all Cabernet? Is the oak really all French? And then she pours into her own glass. I swirl my glass and look at it against bright white back drop of my desk blotter. Surprisingly, the wine is more red than purple. There is a hint of black in the red and there is a little haziness. Nothing unusual there but not exactly what I expected. I swirl it some more and then sniff. Red fruit. Now I'm surprised. I think about the judging panel. How did a red fruit-dominant Cabernet make it past the judging panel in an over \$50 per bottle Cabernet class in Houston? Seems unlikely at best. I taste. I swish the wine around my mouth. Yes, red fruit - some tobacco, some black pepper, a bit of dust. The fruit is muted, the wine lacks complexity. A mystery. This is a \$70.00 bottle of Cabernet? Not in my Cabernet section. I tell her. She sighs - but she knows the wine isn't there. Then I notice she has another bottle.

I ask: "Do you want to open the other bottle?"

"Sure" A dame with nothing to lose. She gets fresh glasses.

This time the cork really pops out of the bottle. Not muffled but clear like the bark of .22 on a cold January morning. She pours. The wine is purple. A drop hits my blotter and the contrast is evident. More evidence. But of what?

I tilt the glass and the color is richer and more saturated but at the same time darker and brighter. The wine glistens with dark richness in the glass. I swirl some more and sniff. Dark purple-black fruit with hints of red fruit. More alive. Accents of tobacco and cedar, and dark spice. Grows richer in the mouth. Dark red and black fruit perfume. Vivid, vibrant. I could see how a Houston panel would give this wine a Champion buckle. I could see how a Texan would pay \$70.00 to drink a bottle of this winner. It was worthy.

Could these two bottles be the same wine? I noticed the labels are numbered. They are only fifteen apart.

I question her.

She says "I don't understand. They are the same wine. Maybe its bottle variation..."

I say "Bottle variation?! Not likely. Something else is wrong here. Show me the cork."

She hands me the cork from the second bottle. It looked perfect. A dark stain on the bottom where it had touched the wine and pristine on the sides. As it should be.

"No." I say. "The cork from the first bottle."

She reaches under the desk.

I wait for it.

She brings her hand up to reveal the first cork. The other cork. The cork with the stains running up the side of it. The piece of evidence that makes all the rest of the evidence irrelevant. As I looked, she looked too ... and she knew what I knew. The first wine had been killed. Murder. Somewhere in the desert between California and our slice heaven on earth - Texas as we call it - the bottle had gotten hot. Cooked. Baked. Fried.

In the moment, she starts to say something. She stops. She begins and stops again. Her memory defeats her as she yields to the obvious. She confesses. The first bottle had been shipped to her via FedEx or UPS ground. She had used both. She blamed it on the winery but she knew. She was complicit. She had let it happen. It didn't matter. Both are notorious for taking the life away from innocent wines in their prime. That bottle had been cooked and its fruit - its very life - had slowly ebbed until just the husk of red fruit was left. The second bottle had come via refrigerated truck to the wholesaler in Texas. It was intact, enticing, perfect. Why had she done it? Why had she scorned the first bottle? She had played Russian roulette and the wine was lost.

I asked her "Why did you do it?"

She answered, "I needed the sample."

I replied "But you had to know ..."

She pleaded: "But it was in December. It's OK to ship in December. Everyone ships in December. It's not too hot in December ..." She whimpered. All platitudes, but now she knew. She was wrong. They were all wrong. The dice had rolled and she had crapped out. The risk had always been there and now a bottle was dead. It could have been a case. Or several.

It would never come to trial. Did it happen in Nevada? Was it Arizona? New Mexico? West Texas. Could it have happened in a broiling tin-roofed, non climate controlled Houston warehouse under an unforgiving sun? We'd never know for sure. But I knew. And she knew. Her lack of regard for that villain packing heat -

whether in a metal trailer crossing the desert or a Houston, heat had killed that bottle. Murder in the desert. A sad and sordid tale. And so unnecessary. If only she had shipped the wine the right way using temperature control. If only ...

