

Sweet Poison

WILLIAM RELLING JR.

SWEET POISON

A JACK DONNE MYSTERY

William Relling Jr.



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SWEET POISON

Also by William Relling Jr.

Deadly Vintage

To the memory of Rex Stout

I owe particular thanks to three people, without whom *Sweet Poison* would not exist: my excellent friend Nathan Walpow, the *real* Peter Taylor of Santa Ynez, and the *real* Dan Gainey of Gainey Vineyards, likewise of Santa Ynez. Here's a toast to your health, happiness, and success, guys.

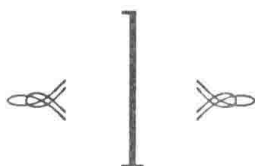
—WRjr

Bacchus, that first from out the purple grape
Crush'd the sweet poison of misused wine.

John Milton

Only the man who knows too little knows too much.

Nero Wolfe



If the three of us getting into the taxicab a little after nine o'clock in the morning, I was the second to spot the runaway Econoline van careening our way. The first to see it was Carla Lubow. She was sitting in the cab's backseat when she happened to turn around and look over her shoulder.

I noticed it only after Carla screamed.

Her scream made me glance up from trying to wedge our employer, Mr. Augustus Poole, into the seat beside her. I looked over at Carla, then turned toward where she was pointing.

The cab was idling in front of Mr. Poole's residence, double-parked on Jones Street, a couple of houses up from the base of Russian Hill. By the time I spotted the van, it was closing fast. I could tell it was a runaway by the way it weaved from side to side, doing none too good a job of staying on the proper side of the yellow line. It scraped the vehicles parked on either side of Jones Street, making shrill skreeks of metal on metal. I also could tell it was a runaway because there was no driver behind the wheel. Nobody in the van at all, as far as I could tell.

What I did was strictly reflex. I'd been trying to shimmy Mr.

Poole's substantial bulk through what was for him a too-narrow opening. Registering the van's imminent arrival, I grabbed the fat man by the collar, planted my feet firmly, and yanked him backward with all my strength. He popped out of the cab's door like a champagne cork, and the two of us went tumbling ass-over-teakettle. We landed in a heap on the other side of the street, with me on the bottom—crushed beneath 300-odd pounds of squirming human flesh.

I didn't see what happened with the van, but as it turned out, our cabbie's reflexes were as good as my own. He spotted the runaway in his side-view mirror, shifted from park into drive, and jammed his foot on the accelerator, whipping the steering wheel at the same time. The cab shot forward and swung a wide turn into the intersection at the bottom of Jones Street. The cab's open rear door whanged against a couple of parked cars an instant before the runaway van reached the bottom of the incline. The van's front wheels made a sudden, hard lurch to the left, causing the whole thing to tip over. It skidded on its side, sliding through the intersection and raising an impressive shower of sparks before smashing, roof first, against a lamppost.

But as I said, I didn't see any of this. I heard it well enough—the crunching of metal, the shattering of glass, the screeching of brakes, the honking of horns. But I didn't see anything, because I was busy trying to crawl out from under Mr. Poole before he smothered me to death.

At last we managed to untangle ourselves and sat there on the curb, breathing heavily. He glared at me as if to say, What in God's name did you think you were doing?

I was working too hard at trying to suck air into my deflated lungs to say anything. I managed to wave a hand in the direction of the intersection, where, judging from the sound, an excited

crowd was gathering. I could also hear the distant wail of an approaching police siren.

At my gesture, Poole turned toward the intersection. He studied the scene for a moment, narrowing his eyes. Then he turned back to me. Evidently he'd made up his mind what had happened, because his angry expression had become haughty and smug.

"Well, Mr. Donne?" he said.

I was still short of breath. "Well, what?"

He looked at me as if he thought he was speaking to a moron. "Now do you believe that someone is trying to kill me?"

IF I'D FELT motivated, I probably could have assured Poole that a runaway delivery van makes for a mighty unreliable murder weapon. Effective, maybe, if the vehicle happened to hit you head-on, but not nearly so easy to aim as, say, your basic Saturday night special.

And indeed attempted murder turned out not to have been the case. I'd already guessed this even before a uniformed San Francisco Police Department patrolman informed me that the van's driver had been delivering flowers to one of Poole's neighbors up the street. The driver had simply done a crappy job of parking. Not only had he forgotten to turn his wheels to the curb—which should be a capital offense in San Francisco—but he'd also not bothered to engage his emergency brake. To me it was nothing more than a textbook example of Murphy's Law. Once the van's transmission accidentally slipped into neutral, all it took was a little gravity to send the thing hurtling downhill. Toward us.

Eventually, even Poole seemed convinced there was nothing

deliberate about what had happened with the runaway van. Unless you believed—as I was beginning to—that some higher power might have it in for him. I'd been in the man's company for a fairly short time, but it wasn't hard for me to conceive that, given the personality he'd demonstrated, he'd accrued a pretty serious karmic debt over his fifty years of life. Were I one of the powers that be, I might want to run him over with a truck myself.

By the time everything had settled down enough for us to remember why we'd been getting into a taxi in the first place, we were too late to catch the 10:00 train that was to take us to Bakersfield. Poole—to nobody's surprise, especially mine—immediately threw another fit. I can't say that by now I was getting used to his tirades, but I seemed to be getting better at ignoring them.

I'd also begun to dope out the true function of Ms. Lubow, the fat man's assistant. "It's all right, Mr. Poole," she cooed. "We'll just catch the next train. It doesn't leave until one-thirty. This way we don't have to hurry so much."

Poole's face had turned as purple as a Concord grape, but just those few soothing words from her and you could see him start to reel it in. The lull didn't last long, though. Turning away from Carla, Poole spied the cabdriver—who had probably saved Carla's life, just as I'd saved Poole's. The cabbie—a short, skinny, scraggly-bearded Middle Easterner—was attempting to explain in pidgin English what had happened with the cab and the van. He was speaking to the same SFPD patrolman who'd spoken to me earlier.

Poole bellowed to the cabdriver, "You, boy! Stop right there!"

Both the cabbie and the cop—who happened to be a black man—turned around. Advancing upon them, Poole commenced berating the poor cabbie. My obese employer seemed to have

forgotten that his assistant had just informed him we had better than three hours till the next train. He began demanding that the cabdriver return to his vehicle at once, so as to convey Poole, Carla, and me to the Emeryville Amtrak station without further delay. The cabdriver, the cop, and Poole commenced an angry, three-way exchange that hit peak volume about ten seconds after it began.

I'd stopped listening by then. I figured the thing to do instead was ask Carla to let me back in the house so I could phone for another cab. Walking up the steps, I asked myself for the umpteenth time how I'd managed to get talked into nursemaiding one of the most loathsome individuals it had ever been my displeasure to meet.



It was a rhetorical question, since of course I knew the answer. I was doing a favor—partly for my uncle Gerry, and partly for my friend Peter Taylor.

The series of events culminating with my saving Augustus Poole from a runaway florist's van had begun some four weeks before, a couple of Sundays following Memorial Day. According to the calendar, June 21 was still several days away, but I'd been in my own personal summer mode since the middle of May. In my business—I grow grapes and make wine for a living—summer is usually a pleasant time of year. Most of the vinicultural work has been done. The fruit needs minimal tending—keeping an eye out for weeds and pests, too much or too little sun and water, that sort of thing. But it's not at all like the fall harvest season, when things get busiest. Nor is it like winter, when the rains come and everything slows to a molasses crawl, or spring, when you have to pay close attention to getting a new vintage started.

Not much actually happens during the summer. The vines have made their growth, and the fruit is beginning to ripen, but everyone's cellars are about as idle as they get. That's one reason

why summer is when winemakers open their doors to visitors who'd like to take a look around and sample whatever wares you might be marketing. A little simple PR, if you will.

Different winemakers have different rules for strangers. Some open tasting rooms, some conduct full-blown tours of their facilities, and some just hang a surly sign, "Keep Out: This Means You." We at Donne Vineyards—the business co-owned by my father, my uncle Gerry, and me—invite people to drop by on weekends during the summer. Though we don't have a regular tour, Dad and I are happy to show you around. Most tourists, though, are less interested in a behind-the-scenes look than they are in quaffing a bit of wine. That's why we devote most of our energy to operating a small tasting room, from 11:00 A.M. till 5:00 P.M., Saturdays and Sundays, May through September.

"We" being—besides myself—my father and our sole full-time employee, Jesus Fonseca. My uncle Gerry—Dad's brother—is a full partner in the business, but he has little to do with anything that involves getting sweaty or dirty. Gerry Donne is one of southern California's more highly regarded financial lawyers. He takes care of the suit-and-tie portion of Donne Vineyards, Inc., operating out of a spacious office suite in downtown Santa Barbara. His office is a forty-five-minute drive from the grape-growing and wine-manufacturing end of the family business, out in San Tomas, in the northern Santa Ynez Valley. His home is also in Santa Barbara—on the grounds of the La Cumbre Golf and Country Club—barely a hop, skip, and a jump from where he works.

That he lives rather far away from us—Dad and I share a ranch-style house that sits on the vineyard's grounds—makes it a surprise whenever Gerry drops by unannounced. That, plus his legal-beagle nature, which insists you should always call first to make sure there isn't a previous appointment ahead of you.

As it was a Sunday afternoon in June, a little past four o'clock, my uncle could be reasonably certain where he'd find us. We've set up Donne Vineyards' tasting room in the smallest of four outbuildings arranged in a U around the main house. It gets warm in the valley during the summer—the mean midday temperature from the end of June through the beginning of October regularly pushes ninety degrees, and I can attest from having lived here for much of my life that as often as not it pushes pretty hard.

This day was no exception. I'd checked an outdoor thermometer around noon and noted that it was ninety-two in the shade. Dad and I keep things dark and cool in the tasting room, the interior air-conditioned to around sixty-eight—our attempt to approximate the feel of a wine cellar. Because Donne Vineyards is somewhat isolated from the other wineries in the valley, usually by the time guests arrive they've been out in the sun for a while. They tend to be mighty hot and mighty thirsty.

This particular Sunday had been about average, in terms of visitor trade, with a couple dozen folks moseying up the long driveway to the gravel lot that fronts our house. We were pouring our most recent chardonnay release, chilled chard being popular among dry and dusty tourists, and by midafternoon we'd sold four or five cases of wine.

Our visitor traffic had slowed, as it usually did by that time of day. Dad and I were alone in the tasting room when I spotted my uncle's Cadillac Seville rolling up the drive. Dad was sitting behind the makeshift bar we set up on weekends, one hand resting on the quad cane he's used to help himself get around ever since his stroke, a few years back. I was leaning on the sill of the tasting room's only window, peering out toward the heat shimmers rising off Highway 154 a quarter of a mile away.

Hearing the crunch of tires on gravel, Dad questioned me with a look: More customers?

"It's Uncle Gerry," I said.

"Uncle Gerry?"

"Uh-huh. How come you didn't tell me he'd be stopping by?"

"I didn't know," Dad said.

I looked at him over my shoulder, surprised. "You didn't?" Dad shook his head.

I turned back to the window. By then Gerry had braked his car, raising a small cloud of dust. He shut off the Caddy's engine, and the car shuddered for a moment, like a hippopotamus shaking itself dry after a dip in the river. The car settled, just as Gerry was emerging from the driver's side. He spotted me, smiled, and waved hello.

Typical of the men in our family, Gerry is a good-size human being. Like my dad, he's an inch shorter than my 6' 2" — which still makes both of them taller than the average American male, though since his stroke Dad hobbles with a pronounced stoop that makes him seem shorter. Dad, who is two years younger than Gerry, is also built more like me—lean and lanky, instead of wide-bodied, like my uncle. The two of them have the same freckled, easy-to-sunburn skin I have—inherited from our Scottish ancestors—and the same shock of straight, straw-colored hair, though my father's and my uncle's turned gray some years ago. Gerry's face is fuller than either my dad's or mine, but all three of us have the same dark, deep-set eyes—making for the kind of expression my late mother often used to call "brooding."

While that may be a term you could apply at times to my own temperament, my dad and my uncle are anything but. Which isn't to say they don't have their dark sides. Dad and Gerry are as hotheaded and mulish as any Scotsmen, and they disagree with each other and anyone else on any number of issues—politics, sports, religion, you name it. But ever since combining their resources to start Donne Vineyards, they've made