

Bitter Orange

by Marshall Moore

CHAPTER ONE

Saturday, Sunday

The wine bottle slipped out of Seth Harrington's grasp, but his left hand was faster: he snatched it out of midair by the neck. Sweat filmed his palms. For half a second he thought he was going to drop it, but his grip held. A dull ache flared in his wrist.

"Shit!" he said under his breath. "Close call."

Then he backed into the wine display behind him and, with his backpack, knocked two bottles off the shelf. Green glass and red wine splashed his legs, instantly soaking through the fabric of his jeans.

The woman behind the counter—Seth had never known whether she owned the convenience store or just worked there—leapt to her feet and hurried down the aisle toward him and his mess, swearing in a language he couldn't identify. Middle-aged and Middle Eastern, she'd always looked a second away from slapping anybody who provoked her. Seth found this confusing: didn't scowling at customers for counting out their change too slowly or dithering over purchases leave them disinclined to come back? And now she was charging toward him like an entire battalion of...

Fuck it. Seth hated feeling six years old again. The first time around, he hadn't liked being six, and he preferred to keep his subsequent visits to childhood brief and infrequent. He set the bottle back on the nearest flat surface—carefully, slowly, because his hands were shaking. He thought of bulls and china shops. Was every Taurus such an ox in public? If he'd been born an Aquarius, for example, would he move with more grace and less damage?

"You are going to pay for those bottles of wine," said the woman.

A poison bouquet of Merlot and brown floor muck bloomed in Seth's nose. It's one thing to sniff a freshly decanted red and another thing to shower in it. As for the rain, San Francisco in mid-

January is indistinguishable from Seattle: wet roads, wet floors, grey skies, grey moods. As if that weren't enough, the woman's breath smelled as if she had never flossed. She might take a swipe at her incisors with a spavined brush and some Colgate now and then, but Seth was afraid to look too closely when she opened her mouth. He didn't want to see the fossilized clots of food like grout between her teeth.

"Sure," he said. He tried not to inhale. He couldn't take a step backward for fear of glass piercing the sole of his (once blue, now sopping purple) Converse low-tops. When had he last updated his tetanus vaccinations? If he couldn't remember the date, then he probably needed the shot. "I'm really sorry."

She flapped a hand at him and muttered something else in that language of hers. Was it Farsi, maybe? Maybe not. Weren't Persians supposed to be delightful, civilized people? Maybe she was from somewhere else, somewhere with more machine guns and suicide bombers. Iraq? Waziristan? Hades? This wasn't the right time to ask. Seth strained to make sense of what he heard: was it a dismissal, or was she swearing at him?

The electronic door chime beeped, signifying entry. Seth saw his roommate Sang-hee approaching with a *whatthefuck?* look splashed across his face.

"I can't leave you alone for a minute," Sang-hee said.

"Your friend is clumsy!" the woman said. "I should make you pay for three bottles, because of the time it will take me to clean the floor! Have you thought about that? I'm here alone! All alone!"

Except for your imaginary friends, Seth thought.

The woman turned and shoved her way past Sang-hee. Not a large man to begin with, about five foot five and skinny in a muscular way, Sang-hee was the last pin standing and the livid shopkeeper was the bowling ball. She knocked him against a shelf of soft drinks and bottled water. The collision sent several flavors of Perrier flying, and more fizzy explosions ensued. Seth caught a whiff of muddy citrus.

"I'm sorry!" Sang-hee looked stricken. "I didn't mean to..."

"Clumsy!" screamed the woman. "Both of you! I should call the police! It should be against the law!" At this, she broke off with dark mutterings about *People in this country...* and switched back to her native tongue.

She huffed and puffed her way into a back room, presumably either to blow the house down or find a mop. Or a Kalashnikov.

Sang-hee squatted and began to pick up shards of pale green glass. Seth felt boorish for not having immediately done the same thing, when he'd knocked the wine off its shelf... but then, the cascade of imprecations had begun right away. Vulgarity tended to stifle his nobler impulses.

The aisles are too narrow and there's too much merchandise on the shelves, he thought. *I couldn't help it. And we're in California. What happens when there's an earthquake? Is she going to scream at the ground when it shakes?*

Sang-hee looked up. He'd finished collecting the pieces of Perrier glass big enough to pick up without cutting his fingers. Seth, needing to do something, scanned the fizzing gunk on the floor for more shards.

"I'm going to get her garbage can for this glass," Sang-hee said. "It's like a car wreck in here."

"But without the body parts," Seth said.

"And the skid marks."

"After this? Speak for yourself."

Sang-hee's back was turned and the shopkeeper hadn't emerged from her lair. Seeing no video cameras overhead, no dome of mirrored glass, nothing to suggest surveillance, Seth unshouldered his backpack, unzipped the largest compartment, and slipped the bottle of Merlot—the one he'd meant to buy—inside. A line had been crossed. He understood being annoyed because a customer had smashed merchandise by mistake, but her verbal abuse was uncalled for.

She brought it on herself, he thought. He didn't know where the urge had come from, and he knew he'd have to keep telling himself that until he'd drunk two or three glasses of stolen vintage. *I'm not a*

thief. I wouldn't normally do this kind of thing. Justice is a strange octopus.

Besides, he and Sang-hee didn't usually shop here.

"I see what you're doing!"

Seth almost pissed down his leg.

How she'd snuck up on him without making a sound, he had no idea: she was close enough that she must have seen him stashing the wine in his backpack. He hadn't even slung it over his shoulder again. But no, she was yelling at Sang-hee behind the checkout counter.

"What the hell are you doing back there?"

Sang-hee looked up in alarm.

"Your garbage can is too full. I wanted to bring it back there for the broken glass..."

"GET OUT!" she screamed. "GET OUT OF MY STORE, BOTH OF YOU!"

Seth and Sang-hee fled the shop, ducked their heads in the drizzle, and hurried across the street to a coffee shop to relax with caffeine.

"So much for buying a bottle of wine for dinner," Sang-hee said, when their drinks came.

"It's the Bay Area," Seth said. "There's a wine shop on every other block."

"I thought her selection was pretty good. Somebody told me she had a Merlot from Tunisia that was worth trying."

"Is that what this is?" Seth unzipped his backpack and reached inside. He withdrew the bottle and inspected the label. "Tunisia. Wonder if it's any good. Date wine, I'd have expected. Fermented camel sweat, maybe. Does camel sweat ferment?"

"Did you pay for that?"

"No," Seth said. "She did."

Poor Sang-hee: too many surprises in one day, Seth thought.

"Oh." Sang-hee looked troubled. His hands shook: he'd been trying to quit smoking. Seth had doubts about how well it was

working out. Grad school is like that. "Does that make it okay? Two wrongs make a right?"

Seth shrugged. "The voices in my head commanded me to do it. They were speaking Korean, though, so I had to guess what they were saying. I didn't have time to write it down so you could translate it, and that woman was in my face yelling..."

"You don't hear voices in your head, do you?"

"Only on the second and fourth Mondays of each month."

"It's Saturday," Sang-hee said.

"You see my point."

Seth's roommate looked outside at the rain, falling harder now. He seemed to have resolved something for himself, because he looked back at Seth with an odd sideways smile and said, "Let's drink the whole bottle when we get home."

