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# A Good Year

Peter Mayle

## Chapter 1

It was high summer in London, and the raindrops felt almost warm on Max Skinner's face as he ran up Rutland Gate and into Hyde Park. He followed the curve of the Serpentine while the shapes of other people determined to suffer before breakfast came and went in the gray predawn murk, their faces slick with rain and sweat, their progress marked by the moist slap of their footsteps on the path.

The weather had discouraged all but the hard-core joggers. It was too wet for those bouncing, pink-cheeked girls who sometimes provided Max with a little welcome distraction. Too wet for the resident flasher who was usually on duty behind a bush near the bandstand, leer and raincoat at the ready. Too wet even for the pair of Jack Russells whose joy it was to nip at every passing ankle, their embarrassed owner lumbering after them mouthing apologies.

It was too wet, and perhaps too early. Max had been getting into the office late recently, often as late as seven-thirty, and Amis, his boss and nemesis, was not pleased. This morning would be different, Max promised himself. He'd get in first, and make sure the miserable sod knew it. That was the big problem with Max's working life: he liked the job but loathed the people, Amis in particular.

Turning at the top of the Serpentine, Max started back towards the Albert Memorial, his thoughts on the day ahead. There was a deal that he'd been nursing along for months, a deal that would deliver a bonus big enough to pay his infinitely patient tailor and, much more important, get the bank off his back. Occasional murmurs of discontent about the size of his overdraft had turned into letters couched in ever more menacing terms, underlining the fact that it had been a lean year so far. But it was going to change, Max felt sure. With a surge of optimism, he sprinted down Rutland Gate, shook himself like a dog on the doorstep, and let himself into the stucco-fronted Georgian house that a developer had gutted and converted into what he described as highly desirable executive pieds-à-terre.

The janitor of the building, a gnome of a man with a papery, subterranean complexion, looked up from his vacuum cleaner and clucked his tongue at the trail of wet footprints Max was leaving on the carpet.

'You'll be the death of me, you will. Look at that bleeding mud, all over my Axminster.'

'Sorry, Bert. I keep forgetting to take off my shoes before I come in.'

Bert sniffed. They had the same conversation every time it rained, and it always ended with the same question. Bert was a keen follower of the stock market, and

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longed for the chance to do a little insider trading. 'Got any good tips for today, then?'

Max paused at the door of the elevator and put a finger to his lips before speaking. 'Buy low. Sell high. Don't tell a soul.'

Bert shook his head. Cheeky young git. But then, he was the only one in the building to remember Bert's birthday with a bottle of Scotch, and there was always a nicely filled envelope from him at Christmas. Not a bad lad, thought Bert, as he pushed the vacuum cleaner back and forth over the traces of wet mud.

Max's second-floor apartment was a work in progress; or, as a decorator friend with his eye on a lucrative assignment had said, an unfinished symphony. At the moment, it was a place used for sleep and very little else. There were two good modern paintings leaning against the wall, a few pieces of spiky avant-garde furniture, a dusty and sorry-looking ficus, a battery of stereo and video equipment. Despite having been there for more than two years, Max had managed to avoid giving the apartment any personal touches, apart from a small pile of running shoes in one corner. He went into the tiny, unused kitchen, opened the refrigerator, empty except for a bottle of vodka and a carton of orange juice, and took the carton with him into the bathroom.

Hot water and cold juice. The after-run shower was a daily reward for one of his few healthy habits. He worked too hard, ate in the irregular way of bachelors, slept too little, and certainly drank more than the five units of alcohol a week decreed, with sanctimonious relish, by the company doctor. But he ran, and he was young. Forty was several years away, and by then, he told himself, he would have his life and his finances in order, ready to settle down and – who knows – make another gallant attempt at matrimony.

He studied his reflection in the shaving mirror. Blue eyes, only slightly bloodshot; dark brown hair, cut short in the current fashion; skin taut over high cheekbones. As yet, no obvious bags or wrinkles. Could be worse, he thought, as he stepped over the wet towel and discarded running clothes on the bathroom floor.

Five minutes later, he was ready to conquer the financial universe, dressed in the uniform and trappings of the modern young executive: dark suit, dark blue shirt, dark tie, a bulky watch designed for deep-sea divers obsessed with punctuality, cell phone and car keys at the ready. He ducked through the drizzle and into the obligatory black BMW for the drive to the City, where today, he felt sure, the long-awaited deal would come through. And then the bonus. He'd finish furnishing the apartment, hire a housecleaner to keep it spotless, take a few days off, and drive down to Saint-Tropez before all the girls went back to Paris. Not even the weather forecast on the radio – scattered showers, followed by outbreaks of heavier rain, with a chance of hail – could dampen his spirits. This was going to be a good day.

At this time of the morning, twenty minutes should have been more than enough to get him into the Lawton Brothers' offices. They were at the top end of Threadneedle Street – 'handy for the Bank of England,' as the senior Lawton brother was fond of

telling his prospective clients. Established in the late eighties, the company had boomed through the nineties with everyone else, merging and acquiring, ducking and diving, and gaining a reputation for savage asset-stripping that was the envy of its more ethical and kindhearted competitors. Now it was often described in the financial press as a model of tough, efficient management, well suited to today's hard times. Young executives who survived a few years at Lawtons could survive anywhere.

Max's cell phone rang as he was coming down Ludgate Hill. It was just before six-thirty.

'Taking the morning off, are we?' It was the voice of Amis, nasal and aggressive. He didn't wait for Max to answer. 'We need to talk. See if you can get in here by lunchtime. Tracy will tell you the restaurant.'

So much for my good day, Max thought. Although, if he were honest with himself, no day that included Amis could be entirely good. Mutual dislike had been in the air the instant the two men met, when Amis had swaggered in, fresh from spending three years in New York, to run the London office. From the start, their relationship had been tainted, as is so often the case in England, by the simple difference in the way they spoke English. Their accents.

Max was the product of a minor public school, and had grown up in the leafy middle-class comfort of the Surrey hills. Amis was born and raised in the grim outer reaches of south London, neither leafy nor comfortable. In fact, they had grown up less than twenty miles apart, but it might as well have been twenty thousand. Max liked to think that there was not a trace of snobbery in him. Amis liked to think that he didn't have a chip on his shoulder. They were both wrong. But each had a grudging respect for the other's ability, and so, with difficulty, they tolerated one another.

Easing the BMW into its appointed slot in the underground garage, Max tried to guess the reason for today's meeting. Lunch at Lawtons was normally a sandwich at your desk, eyes glued to the screen. Lunch, in a phrase that Amis had picked up in New York, was for wimps. And yet here he was talking about a proper lunch with knives and forks – a wimp's lunch – in a restaurant. It was curious. Max was still puzzling over it as he stepped out of the elevator and made his way through the rows of partitions to his own cubicle.

Lawtons took up the entire floor of a glass and concrete box. With the exception of the mahogany and leather splendour of the large suite shared by the two brothers, the offices had been designed to reflect the spirit of the company: no frills, no aesthetic refinements. This was a factory for making money, and austerity ruled. The Lawtons had a habit of bringing clients on a tour of what they called the engine room for a glimpse of the staff at work. 'There they are, forty of the best business brains in the City. And they're all thinking about your problems.'

Not content with his earlier call, Amis had sent Max an e-mail instructing him not to be late for lunch. Max looked up from the screen toward the glassed-in corner office

where Amis was normally to be seen striding up and down with a phone stuck to his ear, but this morning the office was empty. The big creep must be at a breakfast pitch somewhere, thought Max; or maybe he was off taking elocution lessons.

Max hung up his jacket and got down to work, running the numbers one final time on TransAx and Richardson Bell, the two companies whose charms he was peddling to one of Lawtons' larger clients. If the deal went through, it was going to earn him a bonus that was, he had calculated, considerably more than the prime minister made in a year. He checked and double-checked, and the right answers came up each time. Now he was ready to present everything to the brothers. They could move in, and he would be six figures richer. He leaned back in his chair, stretched, and glanced at his watch. It was past twelve o'clock, and he realized he had no idea where he was supposed to be for lunch.

He crossed the floor to where Tracy, a brisk and well-upholstered young woman, was on sentry duty outside the corner office. She had recently been promoted from Amis's secretary to his personal assistant (a step up, so office rumour had it, that was the direct result of a dirty weekend with Amis in Paris). Sadly, promotion had spoiled her, making her cocky and self-important.

Max perched on the corner of her desk and nodded toward the empty office. 'Are we still on for lunch, or is he busy causing havoc in the stock exchange?'

Tracy looked as though she'd like to have given him a ticket for parking in a restricted area. 'Mr. Amis will meet you at the Leadenhall Cellars. Twelve-thirty sharp. You're not to be late.'

Max raised his eyebrows. The Cellars, once a storage depot for the old Leadenhall market, had been turned into a gentrified wine bar where the young Turks of the City gathered to eat virile lunches – slabs of red meat and Stilton – drink overpriced claret, and prepare for the rigours of the afternoon with a notoriously powerful port. Despite the bare brick walls and the sawdust on the floor, it was one of the City's most expensive restaurants.

'He's dipping into his savings, isn't he?' said Max. 'Any idea what it's about?'

Tracy looked down at her desk and rearranged some papers. 'Not a clue,' she said. The offhand tone of her voice was unconvincing and, Max found, irritating.

'Tracy, there's something I've been dying to ask you.'

She looked up.

'How was Paris?'

So it was true. Leaving her to her blushes, Max went back to get his jacket and an umbrella, bracing himself for a dash through the rain to Leadenhall Street. He hesitated in the doorway of the building before plunging into the thicket of oversized golf umbrellas – this summer's style accessory – that had sprouted everywhere like

multicoloured mushrooms, blocking the pavement and making progress slow and difficult. He was going to be late.

He arrived in the crowded, vaulted room to find Amis already at the table, cell phone to his ear. During his time among the movers and shakers of Wall Street, Amis had picked up some of their more flamboyant sartorial affectations – the aggressively striped shirt with white collar, the scarlet braces, the tie spattered with bulls and bears – decorative flourishes that clashed with his hard, thin-lipped face and convict’s haircut. Whatever he wore, he would always look like a thug. But he had a genius for deal making, and for that he was much loved by the Lawton brothers.

He finished his call, and made a point of looking at his watch – gold, and even bulkier than Max’s, its face encrusted with a multitude of dials: depth in metres, elapsed time, and, a special feature, the waxing and waning of the Nasdaq. ‘What happened to you, then? Lost your way?’

Max helped himself to a glass of red wine from the bottle on the table. ‘Sorry about that,’ he said. ‘Umbrella jam in Leadenhall Street.’

Amis grunted, signalled to one of the waitresses, and became suddenly jovial. ‘You know what would make me a happy man, my love?’ He gave her a wink and a smirk. ‘A nice juicy sirloin, well cooked, none of that blood all over the place. Get enough of that at the office.’ The waitress did her best to smile. ‘And chips. And then I’ll have the crème brûlée for afters. Got that?’ His cell phone chirped, and he muttered into it while Max ordered lamb chops and a salad.

Amis put down his phone and took a gulp of wine. ‘Right, then,’ he said, ‘give me the rundown on TransAx and Richardson Bell.’

For the next half-hour, Max went through the figures and projections, his analysis of the management, and the possibilities of corporate loot and plunder that he had been working on since the start of the year. Amis ate his way through the presentation, making notes on the pad by his plate but offering neither question nor opinion.

Max finished talking, and pushed aside the remains of his congealed chops. ‘Well? Is this why we’re having lunch?’

‘Not exactly.’ Amis was probing the recesses of his back teeth with a toothpick, examining his discoveries with an air of mild interest as he took pleasure in keeping Max waiting.

The waitress came to clear away the plates, which appeared to be the cue Amis had been waiting for. ‘I’ve been having a chat with the brothers,’ he said, ‘and they share my concerns.’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘Your performance, my friend. Your productivity. You’ve been like the walking wounded this year. Pathetic.’

‘You know what I’ve been putting together over the past six months – I’ve just told you.’ Max had to make an effort to keep his voice down. ‘And you know bloody well that deals like this don’t happen in a couple of weeks. They take time.’

Amis greeted the arrival of his crème brûlée with another wink at the waitress. ‘Won’t wash, my friend, won’t wash. You want to know what’s wrong?’ He looked at Max and nodded two or three times. ‘Personal life’s getting in the way. Too many late nights, too much chasing after totty. You’ve lost the killer instinct.’ Taking his spoon, he stabbed his dessert through the heart.

‘That’s crap, and you know it. Both those companies are ripe. This deal is as good as sewn up.’

Amis looked up at him, a fleck of yellow cream on his chin. ‘You’ve got that right, anyway.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I’m taking it over.’ Amis spooned in another mouthful, crunching the caramelized sugar between his teeth.

Max took a deep breath. ‘We’ll see what the Lawtons have to say about that. They’re ...’

‘Too late, sunshine. They’re sorted. I got the green light from them this morning.’

Max saw months of work wiped out. Even worse, he saw his bonus disappearing into Amis’s bank account as his unpaid bills piled up and the bank moved in to tighten the noose around his neck. ‘You can’t do that. It’s bloody daylight robbery. It’s stealing.’

‘Where have you been living? It’s business, that’s what it is. Business. Nothing personal, no hard feelings. And I’ll tell you what I’ll do. I’ve had a tip about a little engineering firm, but I won’t have time for that now. You can take it over.’

A memory came back to Max from many years ago, when his uncle Henry was giving him a lecture about life: Better to die on your feet than live on your knees. Max came to a decision. ‘I can take it over, can I? I can work it up, and then, when it’s all set, I can get screwed again. Is that what you’re saying?’ Max leaned across the table. ‘Well, you can stuff your little engineering firm, and you can stuff your job. I’m not going to work for a thieving prick like you.’

Amis felt a glow of satisfaction as Max pushed back his chair. Lunch had gone according to plan; in fact, it couldn’t have gone better. He’d received a detailed, up-to-date brief on the deal, and, since Max had resigned, there wouldn’t be any severance to pay. Perfect. ‘Suit yourself,’ he said. ‘Your decision. Make sure your desk is cleared out by this evening, OK?’

Max stood up, but Amis hadn't finished with him. 'Aren't you forgetting something, my friend? The company vehicle?' He held out his hand. 'I'll have the car keys, if you don't mind.'

Max took the keys from his pocket and hesitated for a moment before dropping them carefully into Amis's half-eaten crême brûlée.

Amis watched him go. He reached for his cell phone and punched in Tracy's number.

During the walk back to the office, Max's emotions were a mixture of apprehension at what he'd just done and elation at having done it. This was a bad moment to be out of a job, it was true. But the thought of life without Amis and his constant needling was something of a consolation; unfortunately, it was not nearly enough to make up for the lost bonus. He was in trouble, and he needed to find something else. He decided to spend his last afternoon at Lawtons making a few calls. Might even try New York.

When he got back, however, he found he could barely squeeze into his cubicle. Tracy and two security guards were waiting for him.

'Jesus,' said Max. 'What do you think I'm going to do, nick the carpet?'

'Standard termination procedure,' said Tracy. She turned to the guards. 'Stay with him until he's finished, and then report back to me.' She stopped in front of Max as she was leaving the cubicle and smiled sweetly. 'How was lunch?'

Max looked around the space where he had spent most of his waking hours over the past eighteen months. What did he want to take with him? What would he be allowed to take? His diskettes? Certainly not. His official Lawton Brothers desk diary? God forbid. What else was there? Nothing much. He shrugged at the guards. 'Help yourselves, boys.'

Out on Threadneedle Street, he saw an empty cab throwing up a miniature bow wave as it came toward him through the rain. He raised an arm to hail it, remembered that he had just joined the ranks of the unemployed, and waved it on. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been on the London Underground. This was going to be a novel experience. He splashed toward the Bank station, feeling the moisture soaking through the soles of his shoes.

There was no solace to be found in his apartment. Max kicked off his shoes and peeled off his socks. A leaden afternoon light, more like winter than summer, seeped through the windows. The answering machine blinked its red eye.

'You bastard! Where were you last night? I've never been so humiliated in my life. All those ghastly men trying to touch me up. Don't bother ever ...'

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Max winced and shut off the diatribe before it had finished. Working late the night before, he'd completely forgotten that he'd arranged to meet his caller in the bar of the Chelsea Arts Club. Knowing some of his fellow members, he could imagine that their desire to make a pretty stranger feel welcome might have been expressed too enthusiastically. Oh God. Better send flowers and an abject note.

He stripped off his tie and jacket and slumped on the couch, all energy and optimism gone. The apartment was a mess. His life was a mess. As an alternative to housework or vodka, he turned on the television. A cookery programme. A documentary about salamanders. A man with blow-dried hair presenting the news from CNN. Golf, the instant soporific. Max dozed off, and dreamed of drowning Amis in a vat of crême brûlée.

It was evening when the phone woke him. The golfers on the screen didn't seem to have made any progress since Max had dropped off several hours before. Perhaps it was a long hole. He turned off the TV and picked up the phone.

'There you are, you old bugger. I tried you at the office, but they said you'd left early. Are you all right?'

It was Charlie, his closest friend and ex-brother-in-law.

Max yawned. 'I'm fine. No, actually, I'm not fine. It's been one of those days.'

'It's going to start getting better. Tonight, you and I are celebrating the promotion of Charles Willis, real estate's rising star. It happened this afternoon. Bingham & Trout have made me a full partner. Time for young blood, they said. The property business is changing, we must move with the times, a strong hand on the tiller, all that stuff.'

'Charlie, that's terrific. Congratulations.'

'Well, don't just sit there. Come and help me out with this bottle of Krug.'

'Where are you?'

'An old client of mine just opened this place off the Portobello Road. Pinot, it's called - great bar, great wine list, and even as I speak it is crawling with crumpet. All the Notting Hill lovelies, dressed in flimsy garments. I'm fighting them off.'

Max was smiling as he put the phone down and went into the bedroom to change. Ever since they had met at school, Charlie had always been good for morale. And looking out of the window, Max saw that the rain had stopped. His spirits lifted, and he found himself whistling as he went downstairs.

Passing through the lobby on his way out, he stopped to check his mailbox. There was the usual collection of final demands and circulars and one or two of the dinner-party invitations that come the way of every London bachelor; but there was also an intriguing envelope with a French stamp. In the top left-hand corner was a small, stylized image of the statue of Justice, and below was printed the sender's name:



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Cabinet Auzet, Notaires, Rue des Remparts, 84903 St. Pons. Max started to open it, then decided to save it to use as a distraction from the horrors of the tube. He slipped the envelope in his pocket, stuffed the rest of his mail back in the box, and headed for the South Kensington Underground station.

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Standing in the crush of humanity as the tube rattled away from South Kensington toward Notting Hill, Max was rediscovering the face of public transport. Almost everyone around him, it seemed, had undergone the modern tribal ritual of piercing. Pierced nostrils, pierced eyebrows, pierced lips, pierced ears, several pallid but prominently displayed pierced navels. Other visible body parts, those that hadn't been pierced, were tattooed. A handful of older, more conservative passengers, without nose jewelry or ear trinkets, looked like relics from a distant, unadorned age. They buried their faces in books or newspapers, carefully avoiding eye contact with those members of the pierced generation jammed up against them.

Max wedged himself in a corner of the lurching carriage and took the letter from his pocket. He read it once, then a second time, his rusty French gradually coming back to him as he went over the formal phrases. Lost in thought, he almost missed his stop, and he was still preoccupied when he pushed open the thick smoked-glass doors of the restaurant.

The hubbub of a fashionable haunt in full cry washed over him like a wave. The long, low-ceilinged room, with its hard surfaces and echoing acoustics, was a giant amplifier, following the popular theory that a high decibel level is essential for the enjoyment of food. It was a place where, if you were romantically inclined, you would have to bellow sweet nothings in your companion's ear. But that was clearly part of the restaurant's appeal, because every table seemed to be taken.

A sinuous young woman, tightly wrapped in what looked like black clingfilm, swayed up to Max, eyebrows raised, eyelashes a-flutter. 'Do you have a reservation with us tonight?'

'I'm supposed to be meeting Mr. Willis.'

'Oh, Charlie. Of course. If you'd like to follow me?'

'To the ends of the earth,' said Max. The young woman giggled, and led the way with the undulant strut that none but the runway model or the restaurant hostess can achieve without dislocating a hip.

Charlie was at a corner table, an ice bucket at his elbow. He grinned as he saw Max. 'I see you've met the lovely Monica. Isn't she something? Only girl I know who plays tennis in high heels.'

Monica smiled at them before swaying back to the reception desk, and Max looked at the beaming, rosy face of his friend. Dear old Charlie. Nobody could call him handsome – he was a little overweight, carelessly dressed, his hair perpetually awry – but he possessed abundant charm, liquid brown eyes, and an evident enthusiasm for the company of women that they seemed to find irresistible. He had so far avoided marriage, but with some difficulty. Max had been less fortunate.

He had made the mistake, a few years before, of marrying Charlie's sister Annabel. The marriage had been turbulent from the start, and had ended badly. Much to Charlie's disapproval, Annabel had run off to Los Angeles with a film director, and now lived in a four-million-dollar wooden shack on the beach at Malibu. The last time Charlie had seen her, she had embraced the promise of eternal youth offered by Botox and power yoga. Beyond redemption, Charlie had said to Max. I could never stand her anyway; you're better off without her. And so their friendship had survived the marriage, if anything stronger than before.

'Now then,' said Charlie, pouring champagne, 'listen to this. They've doubled my salary, given me a Mercedes and full partnership shares, and told me the world's my oyster. So tonight's on me.' He raised his glass. 'To London property prices – let's hope they continue to go through the roof.'

'Congratulations, Charlie. It couldn't happen to a nicer crook.' Max sipped his wine and studied the bubbles spiralling up from the base of his glass. Champagne, he thought, was always associated with good times – a drink for optimists.

Charlie looked at him, head cocked to one side. 'You said it had been one of those days. What happened? No assets left to strip?'

Max described his lunch with Amis and the small humiliations of handing back his car keys and then finding two bruisers in uniform standing over his desk. 'So that was the bad news: no bonus, no job, no car. But then this arrived.' He pushed the letter across the table.

Charlie took one look at it and shook his head. 'Wasted on me, old son. My French isn't up to it. You'll have to translate.'

'Remember when we were at school and I used to be packed off to spend the summer holidays in France? My dad's brother, Uncle Henry, had a place about an hour from Avignon – big old house surrounded by vines, not far from a little village. Uncle Henry and I used to play tennis and chess, and in the evenings he'd get me tipsy on watered-down wine and give me lectures about life. Very decent old stick, he was.' Max paused for another nip at the champagne. 'Haven't seen him for ages. Now I wish I'd seen more of him, because he died a couple of weeks ago.'

Charlie made sympathetic noises, and refilled Max's glass.

'Anyway, he never got married, never had any children.' Max picked up the letter. 'And according to the will, I'm his sole surviving relative. It looks as though he's left me everything – house, twenty hectares of land, furniture, the lot.'

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'Good God,' said Charlie. 'Twenty hectares is more than forty acres, right? Sounds like an estate to me. A château.'

'I don't remember it quite like that, but it's certainly a big house.'

'With vines, you said?'

'Sure. Vines all over the place.'

'Right,' said Charlie. 'This calls for something a little out of the ordinary.' He raised an arm and made energetic circling motions at a waiter, calling out for a wine list. Turning back to Max, he said, 'You know I've always liked a drop of wine. Well, I'm taking it seriously now, starting a cellar. I'm even going to an evening wine-tasting course. This is all most exciting. Ah, there you are.' The sommelier had arrived, and Charlie started to brief him.

'We're celebrating,' he said. 'My friend here has just inherited a château and a vineyard in France, and so we're looking for something appropriate in the way of homemade wine.' He wagged a finger at the sommelier. 'Homemade in Bordeaux, mind you. A classic claret. None of your New World novelties.'

Charlie and the sommelier bent over the list, exchanging knowledgeable murmurs while Max looked around the room – glossy women and prosperous-looking men, London's privileged class, all of them talking at the top of their voices. Max felt a sudden desire to be somewhere quiet, and then thought of his empty apartment. Not that quiet. He looked down at the letter again, and wondered how much the property would fetch if he decided to sell; certainly more than enough to get him out of the hole he was in. He raised his glass in a private toast to Uncle Henry.

'Excellent,' said Charlie. 'That's the one.'

The sommelier pursed his lips and nodded in silent approval before going off in search of the wine.

'There,' said Charlie, pointing to his choice on the list. 'The '82 Léoville-Barton. Top bottle. Can't do better than that.'

Max looked at where the pointing finger had stopped. 'Are you serious? Three hundred and eighty pounds?'