

The Vineyard at Painted Moon

Chapter One

“Not that what you’re wearing isn’t great, but the party starts in an hour.”

Mackenzie Dienes looked up from the grapevine she’d been studying, her mind still on the tight clusters of small, hard grapes that would, come late September, be ripe and sweet and ready for harvest. Between now and then, she would monitor their progress, willing them to greatness and protecting them from danger, be it mold, weather or hungry deer.

She blinked at the man standing in front of her, tall and familiar, with an easy smile and broad, capable shoulders.

“Party?” she asked, letting her thoughts of the vineyards go and remembering that, yes, indeed, it was the evening of the annual Solstice Party, hosted by the Barcellona family. As she was a Barcellona, by marriage if not by name, she would be expected to attend.

Wanted to attend, she reminded herself. It was always a good time, and Stephanie, her sister-in-law, worked hard to make it a perfect night.

“The party,” she repeated, her voice slightly more panicked this time, then glanced down at herself. “Crap. What time is it?”

Rhys, her husband, shook his head. “You really don’t listen when I talk, do you? We have an hour. You’ll be fine.”

She pulled off her gloves and shoved them into the left front pocket of her coveralls, then stepped behind Rhys and gave him a little push toward the flatbed truck he’d driven out to the west vineyards.

“You say that because all you have to do is shower and get dressed. I have to do the girl thing.”

“Which takes you maybe ten minutes.” He put his arm around her as they hurried toward the truck. “Happy with the grapes?”

“I think so,” she said, glancing toward the healthy vines growing on either side of them. “We might have to do some thinning in a couple of weeks, but so far, so good.”

As they slid onto the bench seat of the old truck, he glanced at her. She smiled, knowing there was a fifty-fifty chance he would call her out on her thinning statement. He was, after all, the vineyard manager. Technically all the decisions about the vineyard were

made by him with her input, but not her instruction. As winemaker, she managed the grapes from the moment they were picked until the wine was bottled.

But at Bel Après, areas of responsibility often overlapped. Theirs was a large, boisterous family in which everyone had opinions. Not that Mackenzie listened to a lot of other ideas when it came to her wines, although as Rhys often pointed out, she was very free offering hers when it came to *his* work.

He drove along the dirt path that circled the vineyard, stopping by her truck. She slid into the cab, then followed him back to the family compound. The main road leading into Walla Walla was thick with tourists who wanted to enjoy the longest day of the year. She merged into the slow-moving traffic, doing her best to keep from glancing at the clock on the truck's dashboard as she inched along.

Vineyards stretched out on either side of the road, flat on the left and rising toward the hills on the right. Bright green leaves topped sturdy trunks that had been carefully trained to grow exactly as she wanted them to. The rows were long and neat, and the spaces between them were filled with native grasses that held in moisture and protected the roots from the heat.

Looking at her healthy crop kept her mind off the fact that she and Rhys were going to be desperately late.

Twenty minutes later, she followed him off the highway onto a less crowded secondary road—a back way home. Five minutes after that, they parked the trucks by the processing buildings behind the big tasting room. Rhys had already claimed one of the golf carts the family used to get around. She slid in next to him and they took off toward the center of the property.

Bel Après Winery and the surrounding land had been in the Barcellona family for nearly sixty years. Rhys and his siblings were third-generation. The original main house had been updated several times. When Rhys and Mackenzie had married, Barbara, Rhys's mother, had suggested they build themselves a house close to hers, rather than commute from town. Eager to stay in the good graces of her new mother-in-law, Mackenzie had agreed.

A large two-story home had been built. Barbara and Mackenzie had decorated every room, the act of choosing everything from light fixtures to doorknobs cementing their affection for each other.

A few years later, Stephanie, the second of Barbara's four children, had gotten a divorce and moved back home with her two kids, requiring another house to be constructed. When the youngest of the three girls had married, the last house had been added. Only Lori, the middle daughter, still lived in the original home.

All four houses faced a huge central courtyard. Mexican pavers were shaded by vine-covered pergolas. The extended family used the space for big dinners and as a kids' play area. If one of the women baked cookies, a cookie flag was hung out the front door, inviting anyone to stop by. At Christmas, a large tree was brought in from Wishing Tree, and for the annual Summer Solstice Party, dozens of long tables were brought in to seat the two hundred or so guests.

Rhys swung the golf cart behind the large main house, circling counterclockwise. Normally he would cut across the courtyard, but with all the party preparations, he had to go the long way. He pulled up at the rear entrance to their house and they dashed inside.

Mackenzie paused to unlace her boots and left them in the mudroom. Rhys did the same. They raced up the stairs together, separating at the landing to head to their individual en suite bedrooms.

Once in her bathroom, she started the shower. Thankfully, she'd already picked out the dress she would wear. She raced through a shower. After she dried off, she wrapped her hair in a towel and dug out the scented body lotion Rhys had given her a couple of years ago. Why anyone would want to smell like coconut and vanilla was beyond her, but he liked it.

She walked into the large closet and opened her underwear drawer. To the right were all the sensible bikini panties she usually wore—to the left were the fancier ones for special occasions. She chose a black pair and slipped them on, then went to the second drawer and looked for the matching push-up bra. When it and the pads were in place and doing the best they could with her modest curves, she pulled on a robe and returned to the bathroom.

After plugging in her hot rollers, it took her only a few minutes to apply eyeliner and mascara. She was flushed from the day working outside, so she didn't bother with any other makeup.

Her hair took a lot longer. First she had to dry the dark red shoulder-length waves, then she had to curl them. While the rollers were in place, she searched for a pair of black high-heel sandals that wouldn't leave her crippled by the end of the night.

Those found, she opened her small jewelry box and pulled out her wedding set, sliding both the engagement ring and the wedding band into place on her left hand. Diamond stud earrings followed. She'd barely stepped into her sleeveless black dress when Rhys walked into the closet, fully dressed in black slacks and a dark gray shirt.

She sighed when she saw him. "See. You have it so much easier than me."

"Yes, but in the end, you're more beautiful. That should be worth something."

"I'd rather have the extra time."

She turned, presenting him with her back. He pulled up the zipper, then bent to collect her shoes. They retreated to her bathroom and together began removing the curlers.

"We're late," Mackenzie said, catching sight of his watch. "Your mom is going to be all snippy."

"She'll be too busy welcoming her guests."

The last of the curlers was flung onto the counter. Mackenzie fluffed her hair, then pointed to the bedroom.

"Retreat," she said, reaching for the can of hair spray.

Rhys ducked to safety. She sprayed the curls into submission before running into the bedroom to escape the death cloud. Rhys was on the bench at the foot of the large bed. She sat next to him and quickly put on her shoes.

"Done," she said, pausing to reacquaint herself with the seldom-used skill of walking in heels.

She grabbed her husband's wrist. "Seven fifteen. Barbara's going to kill us."

"She's not. I'm her only son and you're just plain her favorite."

"We weren't ready exactly at seven. I can already hear the death-march music in my head. I want to be buried on Red Mountain."

Rhys chuckled as he led the way downstairs. "In the vineyard? I'm not sure your decaying body is going to be considered organic."

"Are you saying I'm toxic?" she asked with a laugh as they walked toward the front door.

"I'm saying you're wonderful and I'd like us to have a good night."

There was something in his tone, she thought, meeting his gaze. She'd known this man her entire adult life. They'd met over Christmas her freshman year of college. Her roommate, his sister Stephanie, had dragged Mackenzie home to meet the family. Grateful not to have to spend the holiday by herself, Mackenzie had gone willingly and had quickly found herself falling not only for her best friend's hunky older brother but for the entire Barcellona family and the vineyards they owned. Barbara had been like a surrogate mother, and the vineyards, well, they had been just as magical as Rhys's sexy kisses.

Now she studied her husband's expression, seeing the hint of sadness lurking behind his easy smile. She saw it because she hid the same emotion deep inside herself. The days of stealing away for sexy kisses were long gone. There were no lingering looks, no intimacy. They had a routine and a life, but she was less sure about them still having a marriage.

"I'd like that, too," she murmured, knowing he wasn't asking them not to fight. They never did. Harsh words required a level of involvement they simply didn't have anymore.

"Then let's make that happen," he said lightly, taking her hand in his and opening the front door.

The sounds of the party engulfed them, drawing them into the rapidly growing throng of guests. Mackenzie felt her mood lighten as she took in the twinkle lights wrapped around the pergola, the tables overflowing with food, the cases of Bel Après wine, stacked and ready to be opened. Servers circulated with trays of bruschetta. There was a pasta bar and a dessert station. Music played through speakers hidden in foliage, and the delicious smell of garlic mingled with the sweet scent of summer flowers.

Mackenzie spotted Stephanie talking to one of the servers and gave Rhys's hand one last squeeze before separating from him and walking toward her sister-in-law.

"You outdid yourself," she said, hugging her friend.

"I'm pretty bitchin'," Stephanie said with a laugh, then waved her hand toward the twinkle lights. "Those will be a lot more effective when the sun goes down in two plus hours."

Because the longest day in their part of Washington State meant nearly sixteen hours of daylight.

"You exhausted?" Mackenzie asked, knowing Stephanie had spent the past three weeks making sure every detail of the party was perfect.

"It's been the usual challenge with a few extras throw in," her sister-in-law said lightly. "I won't even hint at what they are, but brace yourself for a surprise or two."

Mackenzie immediately scanned the crowd. “Is Kyle here?”

Stephanie, a petite, curvy brunette with beautiful brown eyes and an easy smile, groaned. “What? No. Not that. I told you. I’m over him. Totally, completely, forever.”

“But he’s here.”

“Yes. Mom invites him every year because he’s Avery and Carson’s father. The fact that he’s my ex-husband doesn’t seem to faze her. You know how she gets.”

Mackenzie did. Once her mother-in-law made up her mind about something, she could not, would not be moved. There was no evolving of an opinion over time. Barbara was a human version of the immovable object.

“Kyle is her oldest granddaughter’s father, and therefore a member of the family.” Stephanie wrinkled her nose. “I deal with the awkwardness of it. On the bright side, she refers to him as ‘the sperm donor,’ which I like.”

“If only he’d fought the prenup, Barbara would have turned on him like a snake.” Mackenzie paused. “You’re sure you don’t want to start back up with him?”

“Yes. Totally. I’m done with that. He strung me along for years after the divorce. No more sex with the ex. It’s been eighteen months since our last bump and grind, and I’m standing strong. I’m horny as hell, but standing strong.” She glanced around at the guests. “Maybe I’ll hook up with someone here.”

“Have you ever hooked up with anyone?”

“No, but there’s always a first time.” Stephanie wrinkled her nose. “I just don’t know how it works. Do we slip away to the barrel room and do it on a desk or something? I can’t take him home—the kids are there. And a car is just so tacky.”

“Because the barrel room isn’t?” Mackenzie asked with a laugh.

“I don’t know. It could be romantic.”

“Or, at the very least, intoxicating.”

Stephanie waved away that observation. “Fine. Not the barrel room, but then I’m still left with a lack of location, not to mention any prospects.” She sighed as they walked toward one of the wine stations. “This is why hooking up has never worked for me. It’s too complicated. They make it look easy in the movies and on TV, but it’s not.”

“I have zero experience. I’m sorry. I’ll read up on it so I have better advice next time.”

“Which is why I love you.” Stephanie shook her head. “Obviously I should let the whole man-slash-sex thing go and focus on other aspects of my life.”

They each asked for a glass of cabernet. While Stephanie simply sipped her wine, Mackenzie took a moment to study the color, before sniffing the aroma. She swirled the wine twice, then inhaled the scent again, liking the balance of fruit against the—

“For heaven’s sake, just drink the wine, I beg you,” Stephanie said with a laugh. “It’s fine. It was fine when you watched the grapes being crushed, it was fine in the barrels, it was fine when it was bottled and it was fine when it won what I’m sure is a thousand awards. Okay? It’s good wine. Relax and stop being a winemaker for one night.”

“You’re crabby.” Mackenzie took a drink and smiled. “For the record, it’s much better than fine.”

“You would say that. It’s your wine.” Stephanie looked over Mackenzie’s shoulder and smiled. “Here comes your handsome husband. I’m guessing he wants your first dance.”

Mackenzie turned and watched as Rhys approached. He enjoyed the dancing at the Solstice Party and took all the female guests for a turn around the dance floor, but he always saved the first one for her.

“Shall we?” he asked, holding out his hand.

She passed her wineglass to Stephanie, then followed her husband to the small dance floor. No one else joined them, but she knew that would change as soon as they got things started.

“We need to check the Seven Hills drip system,” she said as they moved in time with the music. “The forecast says we’re going to get hotter and drier in the next few weeks, and I want to control the exact amount of moisture.”

One of the advantages of “new world” vineyards was the ability to control quality by providing exactly the right amount of irrigation. Once the fruit was established, she could stress the vines, causing them to focus more intensely on the fruit.

“I know better than to point out we walked the vineyard last month,” Rhys said lightly.

“That was a general check. Now I have a specific concern.”

“As you wish.” He spun them in a tight circle. “Maybe the rest of the work conversation could wait until tomorrow.”

“What?” Why wouldn’t they talk about—“Oh. The party. Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize. You’re never truly off duty, but if we could put it on hold for the night, I would appreciate it.”

Because he enjoyed events like these. He liked talking to his friends and meeting new people and generally being social. Rhys was much more extroverted than she was. If someone new joined the tight circle of vineyard owners in the area, he was the first one to go introduce himself.

She nodded her agreement and tried to think of something to talk about that wasn’t vineyard or wine related.

“I hope Kyle leaves Stephanie alone,” she said, thinking that was a more neutral topic. “She’s trying hard to move on.”

“She has to figure out what she wants. He’s always going to ask—it’s up to her to tell him no and mean it.”

She knew he was right, but for some reason his blunt assessment irritated her.

“That’s not very understanding,” she said before she could stop herself. “Kyle’s a big-time Seattle sportscaster with the ability to find a different woman every night. Stephanie’s a small-town single mom working at the family business. Where, exactly, is she supposed to meet someone?”

Her husband stared at her. “What does her dating someone else have to do with whether or not she’s still sleeping with Kyle?”

“There aren’t any other options for her. She’s lonely.”

“She’s going to stay lonely until she gets herself out there.”

“What *there* are you talking about? The giant singles scene here in Walla Walla?”

They stopped dancing and stared at each other. Mackenzie realized this was the closest she and Rhys had come to having an actual argument in years. She had no idea why she had so much energy about the topic or what was causing her growing annoyance. But

whatever it was, the Summer Solstice Party was not the place to give in to unexplained emotions.

“I’m sorry,” she said quickly. “You’re right, of course. Stephanie has to find a way to change her circumstances so Kyle is less of a temptation.”

His tight expression softened with concern. “I want my sister to be happy.”

“I know you do.”

“I want *you* to be happy.”

There was something in the way he said the words. As if he wasn’t sure that was possible.

“I am,” she said quietly, thinking she was almost telling the truth.

“I hope so.”

She faked a smile and waved her hand toward the growing crowd of guests. “You have a lot of women to dance with tonight. You’d better get started.”

He studied her for a second, as if assessing her mood. She kept the smile in place until he turned away. When he was gone, she looked longingly toward her house. Disappearing into the quiet tempted her but wasn’t an option. Tonight was a command performance and there was no leaving early. But soon, she promised herself. In the quiet of her room, she wouldn’t feel the low-grade unease that had haunted her for the past few months. Alone in the dark, she would be calm and happy and think only of good things, like the coming harvest and the wine she would make. Alone in the dark, she would be herself again.

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