

# Chapter 3: The Beginning of My Misfortune

Two days in wine country. Sounds great, right?

It was, for the most part. Our rooms were the pinnacle of luxury with every meal we ate only serving to enforce our belief that chefs here were masters of their craft, and after my massage, the state of relaxation I floated in persisted for hours. Only two things stopped the experience just shy of perfection.

I'd admit one was mostly petty. Personal preference, if you will. I'd forgotten that, for the most part, red grapes were grown here, which meant that, for the most part, red wines were produced.

Now, I wasn't super picky when it came to what I drank. I also didn't have the most cultivated of tongues. To me, alcohol was alcohol. As long as it got me to a beautifully fuzzy, drunken state without gagging me too much, I was happy.

That being said, I did have preferences, as I mentioned. I liked sweet drinks, and I wasn't talking about what most consider sweet. I was talking Moscatos, margaritas, and the occasional whisky sour when social functions required it. Dessert wines were my choice, not what I'd found here.

As I held a glass of cabernet to my nose, our guide on this tasting journey explained this vintage's many qualities and properties while I pretended to care. Beside me, Zubair leaned closer.

"You know they pour such generous portions because they want us drunk," he whispered. "We'll spend more like that."

And here was the second reason I wasn't having the time of my life.

"Thanks, Zub. That's good to know," I said. "It's helped every time you've mentioned it at all the wineries we've visited."

"Oh," Zubair said, frowning. "I'm sorry. I don't remember saying it."

"It's ok, Zub," Spence said, clapping both of our shoulders. "You're only having a good time. We don't mind you repeating yourself. Right, Bren?"

Glaring at him over my glass's lip, I took a long sip.

"No," I eventually say.

As my co-workers continued chatting, I discreetly poured the rest of my sample into a provided container. I'd never *hated* red wines, but cabernets were the bane of my existence.

"Ready for another?"

Well, I'd thought I'd been discreet. Smiling at the impeccably dressed man in front of me, who was raising a bottle in invitation, I shook my head.

"Give me a minute," I said. "I can't appreciate my wine if the room's spinning, can I?"

Chuckling, the man lowered his bottle.

"I'll return soon, then."

"Wait a minute," I said before he could dash off. "I heard someone mention that this winery's owned and operated by a single woman? Is that true? I know a lot of celebrities try their hand at this, but I didn't think the average person did."

"You're well informed, ma'am, although my boss isn't quite the 'average' person," the man said. "Audrey Blair runs the place."

"Interesting. I've never heard the name before," I said.

"I wouldn't expect that you had. The Blair's fame only runs as far as California's border. People from out of state don't often know of them."

"Mm," I hummed, distracted by my co-workers.

They'd, as usual, begun to make fools of themselves with Allan drunkenly chatting up a girl while the others egged him on. Sighing, I turned to the impeccably dressed man, who was watching me with an eyebrow raised.

"Pour me another sample, and I'll take two bottles of your sweetest wine," I said. "I have to go save my friends before they make complete asses of themselves."

With a refilled glass in hand, I made my way toward Allan, keeping an eye out for Tim. Where was our team manager when we needed him?

"What's a pretty girl like you doing here alone?" Allan was saying when I came closer.

The object of his attention curled around her glass with an uncertain twitch to her lips.

"I'm... trying wines," she said. "Isn't that what you're doing?"

"Well, yes, but..."

"Allan!" I sid, wrapping my arm around the man's elbow. "There you are!"

With Allan's attention briefly pulled from her, his victim gratefully smiled at me, and I gave her a subtle nod.

"The boss wants to talk-" I continued.

"Tim can wait," Allan said. "I'm busy."

"Keeping company with this nice woman. I can see that," I said. "Still, Tim didn't look happy-"

"I said he can wait!"

Allan shrugged me off, and as I stumbled away from him, wine splashed down my front. Gasping, I gaped at the damage while a dark stain spread across shirt. It had probably seeped into my camisole too. My glass was empty, my outfit ruined, and the room's eyes were on me.

Too many eyes.

Horrified, Allan said, "Bren-"

Taking a deep breath, I returned to the tasting bar, setting my glass down.

"I'm so sorry. I appear to have made a mess," I said. "Is there any way I could try that last sample one more time?"

The man at the bar said not a word as he poured, and I kept my eyes fixed on that swirling liquid. Once its tumult had stopped, I tossed it back, grimacing at its bitter taste.

"Bathroom?" I asked.

The impeccably dressed man pointed toward a nearby doorway. With directions in hand, I stormed toward it while Allan raced to catch up.

"I'm sorry, Bren," he said. "I didn't mean to... I'll replace the shirt."

"It's ok," I said. "Mistakes happen."

Mine had simply been in trying to help him.

"Once I've cleaned up, I think I'll take a walk around the vineyard," I said. "Can you let the others know they shouldn't wait for me? I'll make my own way to the resort."

"Sure," Allan said. "I'm sorry. Really."

And he headed toward our co-workers with his head hanging and his shoulders slumped. Watching him disappear, I could almost imagine a tail tucked between his legs, and the sight was recompense enough for what he'd done.

Once in the bathroom, I unbuttoned my shirt and tied its sleeves around my waist, pulling my jacket back over my shoulders once I was finished. My camisole only had a few red speckles marring it, a small enough number for public presentation.

Leaning on the counter, I stared into glistening, brown eyes, noting my trembling lip.

“Get it together, you useless piece of shit,” I said. “It wasn’t that bad. There weren’t that many people.”

Because it hadn’t been the embarrassment of the spill or the ruined shirt that had bothered me. I’d had so many eyes on me, and my skin had crawled while my heart had threatened to leap out of my mouth. I’d come within a hairsbreadth of a panic attack, of bolting regardless of who’d stood in my way.

Too many eyes. Too many people. Too much for me.

After washing my hands, I slapped water on my cheeks before wandering outside. With grape vines twisting over their supporting wires, Audrey Blair’s vineyard was quite charming, but it would have looked the same as any other place we’d visited today save for one feature. On its far side, hills halted human cultivation.

With them the only interesting thing in sight, I strolled their way, enjoying the sun on me. Not many people were touring the vineyard, and I was glad for that. I hadn’t found nearly as much time alone as I’d have liked, and after what had happened earlier, I needed time alone. I enjoyed every minute of my walk to the hills. The quiet all around had become my friend with solitude its gift to me.

When I reached the hill’s base, I examined it, all dried grass and rock with a few scraggly trees scattered across its slope. It looked like a miniature, much more parched version of the mountains around San Jose, but this seemed scalable within a reasonable amount of time.

So, that was what I’d do. Climb to the apex, scan my surroundings, and maybe write for a bit before heading to the resort.

My muscles protested my plan halfway to the top. Pausing, I waited for them to stop screaming with my hands on my hips. I had no intention of surrendering. This far up, I could see over the Blair vineyard and to the road beyond. I saw the small villa where Audrey probably lived. I saw where the blue sky met the horizon on the other side of the road, and I wanted to see more.

But perhaps making a beeline for the top wasn’t the best idea. Instead, I spiraled around the hill.

On the face opposite the vineyard, I found more trees with the valley on this side sheltering a grove of them. I spied another vineyard peeking through the leaves, so I knew this grove couldn’t be large, but I was impressed nonetheless.

Not with the trees found here. Sad looking oaks and pines dotted every section of this land. No, I was impressed that a grove this small could look so lush in this dry of a place.

I was so occupied by admiring the green canopy above me that I didn't see the fissure splitting the hill's side up ahead. One minute, I was ambling with my eyes fixed on the serenity above me, and the next I was falling.

It wasn't a long drop, maybe two seconds total. It certainly wasn't long enough for me to understand what was happening.

No, that realization only came when sharp rock bit into my face and a bulge punched into my stomach. For a moment, I couldn't breathe, and I scrambled to roll onto my back. After I'd succeeded, I took a wheezing breath, hissing it back out. Groaning, I patted my body down, certain I'd find *something* broken, but besides small cuts in my cheeks and forehead, I seemed whole.

Now, what the hell had happened? Sitting up, I dashed tears from my eyes to establish where I was. Light shafts were angled toward the patch of pebble I was sitting on, piercing a thin gash in the earth above me. Besides this bit of illumination, dimness surrounded me, one that gradually gave way to pitch black. A faint trickling noise fought the noise of a muffled breeze overhead with leaves and branches rustling in its wake.

An underground spring, albeit running low considering I wasn't soaked right now. That was how the grove stayed so lush!

But... that meant I'd fallen onto its bank, somewhere that was usually full of water when the spring wasn't dry. And it was *underground*.

"Oh, shit," I whispered. "Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit!"

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