

Chapter One

Mendoza, November 1941

Daylight was waning when the scuff of soles on sand alerted me to an intruder. Boots passed, one row over, and I heard a series of yelps, like the coyotes made, circling at night. I shook the dirt from my hands and pushed up to get a better look. A woman was hopping toward me, foot in one hand and boot in the other. It struck me as funny until I saw pain marking her face and rushed forward to help.

“Help you?” I asked, as the empty boot hit the sand with a thwomp.

“Foot cramp,” she grunted, holding the toes that had curled against her heel. I reached out to steady her, dropping to one knee.

“Give it here,” I said.

She hesitated, then stuck her foot out with a grimace, holding onto my shoulder, tight. I kneaded her instep, and the foot uncurled. When I moved to her toes, separating them out and rotating the ankle, she leaned further in. The muscles of her tanned calf were knotted, and I worked them smooth with the pads of my fingers, feeling her soften.

“Step on it gently and walk a bit, see how it feels.” I sat back on my haunches to assess her stride.

She was striking, her face flushed with heat, eyes the same purple-gray blue as the sky overhead. Her gait was even, athletic, her braid of hair so shiny I wanted to touch it. When she bent to pull on her boot, a locket dangled clear of her shirt, and I wondered who had given it to her.

“Thanks. The flight probably did it—took all night to get here.” She brushed the wrinkles out of her shorts and stuck out a hand. “I’m Risher.”

“Brandt, Dieter. Like Peter with a D.” I’d been expecting her, Gray’s little sister. He’d included her on his business trip to Buenos Aires. She’d insisted on stopping here first, to meet his friends--Walther and Fil, and for some reason, me.

“Oh-kay. Then I’m Risher like squish.” A grin spread across her face. “Sent to fetch the dashing field hand for dinner. We eat at seven—don’t be late.”

“Not dashing,” I said, feeling my cheeks warm. “Just busy.”

I fumbled for my tools, unable to look away from her face.

“More like bossy,” she muttered under her breath, just loud enough to hear. I suppressed a laugh and glanced at the vines all around us, calculating the light I had left and the work still to do.

But her eyes had drawn mine back, and I hesitated, curious what she’d say next. Other than blonde hair, she didn’t favor her brother. He was the quiet type, and she couldn’t stop talking.

“You’re not what I expected. I’ve heard ‘Dieter’ stories for years, conjured you up all dark and swarthy, with your dangerous ways. And here you are, tow-headed and scrawny, with crooked eyeglasses.” A smile eased the sting from her words.

“They’re not crooked, just a little bent.” Without thinking, I straightened them, a curse of the Sahara Desert whose winds had damaged my sight.

“Stop pushing them around so much—you’ll make it worse.” She waved a hand across her face, then looked around. “It’s romantic, don’t you think?”

She must mean the vineyard, where every day I bound vines to wires and stakes. Tomorrow I’d trim back leaves from the new pebbles of fruit, expose them to the sun. I’d work my fingers into the earth to break up clods and test for moisture. These simple tasks brought healing, eased harsher times from my mind.

Hand at her forehead, she surveyed the rows I’d labored over for months, as if they’d been planted for her personal enjoyment. As she turned toward the hacienda, I bent to my work, but my thoughts retreating with her.

The table, set up in the shade of a massive elm tree, was laid in celebration—Gray’s arrival, the rising moon, any excuse would do for Walther and Filiberto. Wineglasses, three to a place, reflected the light of a dozen votives, like those in the roadside chapel at the turn-off to the mountains.

Everything about the hacienda spelled welcome; it was a finca in the truest sense. The house sat on a vast property, Fil’s former estate in Spain transposed to the New World. The windows on the wrap-around porch were tall and low enough for me to walk right through, the walls inside an inviting yellow. Braided rugs spread before stone hearths and throws draped worn leather furniture.

My friends crossed the yard as I approached, Walther’s mop of red hair leading the way. A silver-framed photo on their mantle showed him sporting a tiara, in his Berlin cabaret role of Ginger Rogers. He’d landed on Hitler’s most-wanted list and would likely still be a fugitive if not for Fil’s intervention. The wealthy vintner had befriended our small exile group as we sought passage out of Europe, offering work on his finca in exchange for transport on his yacht. In Fil, Walther found a partner for life, and at work in Fil’s vineyard I used the distraction of nature to sort through my choices of where to go next.

Behind Walther came Risher’s oldest of three brothers. Gray was always impeccably dressed, a peddler of fabrics worldwide, the Griffen family business. Risher appeared last, plopping into the seat across from me. Her frilly blouse slid off one shoulder, and when she caught me looking and winked, I quickly glanced away.

Fil took the seat at the head of the table, lifting his wineglass to mark the occasion.

“I propose a toast,” he said, swirling and sniffing. “To Gray and Sissy—welcome to Mendoza.”

I started at the nickname, enough to wobble the table and cause Walther to steady a bottle. He gave me a look.

“What?” he asked. “She said you’d met.”

“We did, hypothetically.” I lowered my voice. “Risher’s just not, you know, the little girl I’d pictured as Gray’s sister.”

The woman in question was revolving her wine glass to reflect the candlelight, and I wondered if she'd lived under Gray's scrutiny long enough to ignore it. We all knew him as overly protective—of friends as well as family.

“Just look at her,” I whispered, forgetting Walther's immunity to women's charms. We realized my mistake at the same time and broke out laughing just as Fil encouraged everyone to enjoy the meal. After a few bites he turned his attention to Risher.

“Before you leave us tomorrow for Buenos Aires, what can I tell you about our country?”

“I bought a book to read on the plane.” She grimaced, and Gray looked like he knew what was coming. “But I only read to where it claimed Argentina is four times the size of Texas before I fell asleep.”

“We may have commonalities other than size--our gauchos are like your cowboys, and natives first settled our land. But now, we are a country of immigrants, starting with the Conquistadores. Our borders are not closed, like yours.”

“There's a lot of talk about them at home, our borders,” Risher said as Fill nodded. “In the papers and on radio.”

“I came here to escape fascism, sold my vineyard in Andalucía, but politics are the same all over. The poor like fascism's authority, the rich its power.” He noticed Walther working the cork from a fresh bottle of wine and motioned for him to take over.

Walther stood, flourished his wineglass and said, “To friendships, old and new. Welcome, Gray, and welcome, Risher.”

He raised a glass in their direction, then tipped it toward me. “And to Dieter, on finishing another section. Your grapes will be our best.”

As the sky filled with stars, I took in the comfort of good friends' company. Moments like this made me question my solitary ways.

“What do you do when you're not tending vines, Dieter?” Risher asked, breaking into the spell of the magical night. “I've only heard Gray's version.”

“I'm in logistics,” I said after a long pause, and a groan went up around the table.

“Go on, Dieter, give us something,” Walther insisted, and I started over, knowing that any story he came up with would be worse than the truth.

“I enlisted in the Army at age eighteen, with atypical skills--fluent in German, English, and Spanish, solid grades from German military academies. I trained all the way through to the Army Ranger designation—by then I was twenty.”

“Tell her how rigorous that is,” Walther said, nudging me in the ribs.

“Two years ago, I was appointed warrant officer, and that’s my rank now,” I said, eager to step out of the spotlight.

“He’s military, but like a consultant, goes where his specialties are needed most,” Gray explained.

“I’ve read about guys like that in Gray’s spy novels.” She looked around the table with something like envy. “Gray travels all over the place, and we never know where he’ll be next. I wish my life were that exciting.”

Walther and Fil shared a look and tossed their napkin onto empty plates.

“She’s thrown down the gauntlet, challenged the universe,” Walther cackled, slapping the table hard enough to wobble the empty bottles. “There’s danger ahead!”

Gray laughed and wagged his finger in Walther’s face. “There will be no talk of danger. Risher can sniff out trouble without any help from you.”

I stood then, to shift us in a new direction, motioning for the plates to come my way. “You should all get settled while I take the kitchen.”

An hour later I stood alone on the lawn of the bunkhouse where I’d moved to make room for our guests, watching for the hacienda lights to go out downstairs. I pictured Risher, hopping through the sandy vineyard with the boot in her hand. Lights flicked on in my former bedroom, and the windowsill framed her figure. Regret washed over me, sudden and unexpected.