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Beneath the Amber Sky

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Introduction

Golden sunlight slants across the DeLuca family vineyard, weaving through the gnarled vines and dappling the earth with an amber glow. To outsiders, this expanse of sun-soaked fields lying nestled between the rolling hills of Northern California seems timeless—untouched, even sacred. The orderly rows hide the struggles and sacrifices of generations, secrets clinging as tightly to the terroir as the roots themselves. For Mia DeLuca, however, the vineyard is both a sanctuary and a reminder of everything she has tried to forget.

Once, Mia fled from this land and its burdens, chasing dreams of art and city lights beyond the valley's embrace. But the call of home is persistent, urgent—echoing in her grandmother's frail voice, in the brittle tension of unspoken words between her and her mother, Celeste. Years away have done little to soften old heartaches or heal family rifts. Now, summoned back by Elise's failing health, Mia must confront not just the women who raised her, but the legacy that binds them together under the ever-watchful eyes of the hills.

Within the creaking walls of the old stone house and the cool shadow of the attic, the past lingers—restless, unresolved. It is here, amid dust motes and the faded scent of pressed grapes, that Mia uncovers a yellowing letter, unopened and hidden since the Second World War. Its presence is a whisper from another life, another love, echoing through the decades and threatening to shatter the fragile peace that remains between the DeLuca women.

As Mia unravels the complicated tapestry of her family's history, she finds herself drawn into the story of her grandmother's youth: a tale of love and loss, risk and resilience, woven against a backdrop of a world at war. In dual timelines that shift as surely as the changing seasons, the vineyard comes alive—not only as a place of tradition and toil, but as a silent witness to heartbreak, betrayal, and hope.

Yet, it isn't only the past that demands Mia's attention. The present, with its own loneliness and longing, offers unexpected companionship in Ben—a stranger whose arrival brings fresh possibility and old shadows of his own. Through rekindled love and fractured family ties, Mia must determine what she truly wants, and what she is willing to forgive in order to claim it.

Beneath the Amber Sky is the story of three women shaped by secrets, bound by love, and forever changed by the choices they make. As the sun sets over the valley and the vineyard glows gold, they must decide whether to let old wounds define them—or whether, at last, there is freedom to be found in truth, forgiveness, and the promise of

tomorrow.

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CHAPTER ONE: Homecoming Among the Vines

The rental car, a practical but uninspired sedan, coughed its way up the winding gravel driveway. Dust, fine as confectioners' sugar, plumed behind it, coating the ancient olive trees that guarded the entrance to the DeLuca vineyard. Mia gripped the steering wheel, knuckles white, a familiar tightness seizing her chest. This wasn't just a homecoming; it was a surrender. Seven years. Seven years since she'd left this very spot, vowing never to return, never to be tethered by the heavy chains of family expectation and the suffocating scent of fermenting grapes.

Now, the scent was the first thing to hit her as she cut the engine—a rich, earthy aroma of ripe fruit and damp soil, mingled with the faint, sweet perfume of jasmine from the porch. It was the smell of home, irrevocably intertwined with the ache of absence. The old stone house, with its terracotta roof and sun-bleached shutters, seemed to sigh in welcome, or perhaps, in resignation. Nothing had changed, and yet, everything had.

Her art studio in Oakland felt a million miles away, a vibrant, chaotic haven where the only demands were her own creative impulses. Here, the demands were silent but immense, carried in the very air. Elise. Her grandmother. The reason for this reluctant return. The reason for everything, it seemed. Mia took a deep, shaky breath, the California sun warming her skin, a stark contrast to the chill that settled in her bones.

A figure emerged from the shadows of the porch, slender and sharp, even from this distance. Celeste. Her mother. The sight of her sparked an instantaneous, almost primal defensiveness within Mia. Their relationship had always been a tightrope walk over a chasm of unspoken resentments, a dance of avoidance and quiet accusation. Mia braced herself, knowing the first words exchanged would set the tone for her unwelcome stay.

Celeste didn't wave. She simply stood, arms crossed, a silhouette against the blinding afternoon sun. As Mia opened the car door, the crunch of gravel under her worn boots sounded deafening in the sudden quiet. The vineyard stretched out around them, rows of mature vines heavy with the promise of autumn harvest, a silent witness to their strained reunion. It looked, as always, impossibly beautiful, and impossibly daunting.

"You're late," Celeste's voice cut through the air, devoid of warmth, as expected. Her tone was flat, accusatory, as if Mia's very existence was an inconvenience.

Mia fought the urge to roll her eyes. "Traffic was a nightmare, Celeste. You know how the 5 is on a Friday." She slammed the car door shut, the sound echoing across the

quiet expanse. "How's Nana?"

Celeste uncrossed her arms, running a hand through her perfectly coiffed, iron-grey hair. "The same. Worse, perhaps. Dr. Ramirez was here this morning. Says she needs round-the-clock care now. The nurses are coming next week." Her gaze, cool and appraising, swept over Mia's paint-splattered jeans and oversized, faded t-shirt. "You look... well, you look like you haven't slept in days."

"Art rarely keeps bankers' hours," Mia retorted, a flicker of defiance in her eyes. It was an old argument, the one about her chosen profession, always dismissed as a childish indulgence by her pragmatic mother. She picked up her duffel bag, the only luggage she'd brought, a testament to her fleeting commitment to this return.

"Did you bring any proper clothes? You'll be seeing people. Family, even," Celeste said, her tone implying that Mia was habitually unprepared for the nuances of human interaction.

"I brought what I needed," Mia said, her voice tight. "My priorities aren't exactly fashion shows, Celeste. I'm here for Nana. That's it."

Celeste's lips thinned into a familiar line. "Of course. Just like you were 'here' for her when you left without a word seven years ago." The old wound, always so quick to fester.

Mia flinched. "That's not fair. I called. I sent postcards. I was trying to build a life."

"A life that didn't include us," Celeste finished, turning on her heel and walking back towards the house. Her movements were precise, economical, like everything she did. Mia followed, her gaze sweeping over the familiar landscape—the ancient olive groves, the distant purple hills, the patchwork quilt of vineyards stretching to the horizon. It was a landscape she'd painted a thousand times in her mind, always in muted tones, never as vibrant as the reality.

Inside, the house was cool and dim, smelling of lemon polish and old books, a stark contrast to the brilliant sunlight outside. Mia's eyes adjusted slowly. The grand entrance hall, with its sweeping staircase and an ornate grandfather clock, had always felt more like a museum than a home. On the polished antique table, a bowl of fresh figs sat, a silent invitation.

"She's upstairs," Celeste said, her voice softer now, edged with a weariness Mia rarely heard. "She's been asking for you."

Mia's heart gave a lurch. Elise. Her grandmother. The woman who had taught her to draw the light, to see the subtle shades in a grape leaf, to appreciate the quiet

strength of the earth. The woman who, despite her formidable presence, had always been Mia's refuge from Celeste's sharp edges. The thought of seeing Elise frail, diminished, sent a fresh wave of dread through her.

As Mia ascended the creaking wooden stairs, each step felt heavy with the weight of unspoken words and unresolved history. The banister, smooth from decades of touch, felt strangely comforting beneath her hand. She paused on the landing, looking out a tall window that overlooked the main vineyard block. The rows stretched out, perfectly aligned, leading the eye towards the distant golden hills. It was a view that had inspired generations of DeLuca women, and, for Mia, had also become a cage.

She found Elise in her sun-drenched bedroom, a faint floral scent clinging to the air. Her grandmother was propped up against a pile of pillows, her once-sharp features softened by illness, her silver hair a halo around her pale face. Her eyes, still a startling shade of blue, flickered open as Mia entered. A slow, tentative smile spread across Elise's lips, a smile that reached her eyes and seemed to chase away some of the shadows.

"Mia," Elise whispered, her voice reedy but clear. "You came."

Mia knelt by the bedside, taking her grandmother's frail hand. It was thin and papery, the skin translucent, but the grip was surprisingly firm. Tears pricked at Mia's eyes. This was the woman she remembered, the fierce, loving matriarch who had ruled the DeLuca household with an iron will and a deep, abiding love for her family and her land.

"Of course, I came, Nana," Mia said, her voice thick with emotion. She squeezed Elise's hand gently. "I wouldn't be anywhere else." The lie felt hollow, even to her own ears. But the look of peace that settled on Elise's face was worth it.

Elise's gaze drifted to the window, to the amber glow of the setting sun casting long shadows across the vineyard. "It's beautiful, isn't it?" she murmured, her voice laced with a wistful pride. "Our land. Always here, always waiting." She turned her gaze back to Mia, a curious glint in her eyes. "You always did see the light, child. In places others only saw shadows."

Mia managed a weak smile, a knot forming in her stomach. Her grandmother always had a way of seeing straight through her, of articulating the unspoken truths. Elise's eyes, however, seemed to hold more than just affection. There was a faint, almost imperceptible tremor in her hand, and a faraway look that Mia hadn't noticed before. Was it just illness, or something else entirely? A secret perhaps, clinging to the edges of her memory? What was it about this vineyard that held such a powerful grip on the DeLuca women, and what had it truly cost them?

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