

# **The Winemaker**

**By**

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*For Tania*

*Flavor scientist and artist, gifted with extraordinary senses of taste and  
smell, but most of all a best friend*

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## Chapter One

Zenobia blinked twice. She didn't hear right. Obviously, she was delusional. It was a joke. Marcos was going to laugh at her now, at her reaction to his sick sense of humor, then she was going to chide him for his insensitivity, and they would eat her chicken-broccoli casserole.

She pinched her eyes shut, hoping if she opened them again, she would wake from a dream, or from one of her hated visions. When she did, Marcos still sat there at their kitchen table, as handsome as ever with his crop of sleepyhead, blond hair and chocolate pudding eyes. He regarded her with a mixture of pity and regret—mostly pity. His puppy eyes looked wounded, as if she had dealt the blow and he was the one suffering.

“You're leaving me, Marcos?” Her words sounded like a dumb echo of his. His was a sure statement. Hers was a question.

“That's what I said.”

She cradled her cooling mug of tea in the hollows of her palms. “But I've cooked and everything. Chicken casserole.” Catching his eyes, her voice trailed off when she saw the finality there.

He looked away and focused on his new three hundred dollar shoes. “I've made up my mind.”

“Look at me!” She didn't mean to yell, but she couldn't help herself. Marcos hated screamers.

He finally lifted his eyes, but not to meet hers. He fixed his gaze on the wall clock. “I suppose we should talk about practicalities.”

“I said look at me!” Her voice raised another decibel.

When he turned his head hesitantly in her direction, careful, as if he expected a physical blow, she swallowed hard and slowed her breathing. “I've just arrived in Santiago three weeks ago.” We've only slept together last night, she wanted to say, but she bit her lip. Instead, she focused on reason. “I left my

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country, my job, my flat, my car, my family ... God, I even gave away my cat for you. I gave up everything to follow you here.”

It took all the self-control she could muster not to cry. “You asked me to come here, remember?” Yes, he had to give in to reason, if not to his feelings. “You said you couldn’t live without me...” Her voice wavered. She looked expectantly at him, an underlying question quivering underneath the bravery she tried to force. “You said we should get married.”

When he said nothing, silence his only defense, it was Zenna’s turn to look away. Her hand went to her ponytail. Maybe if he hadn’t come home to find her in an oversized tracksuit with messy hair... She should have dried it properly, instead of bundling it into an elastic band.

“It’s not fair, Zenna, to blame me.” His voice sounded loud in the unnatural silence of the kitchen. “I didn’t know my feelings were going to change.”

He stared at his now famous hands, soon to be splashed on billboards, the hands that had changed his feelings for her. Zenna watched him rub his celebrity hands together.

Marcos donned his best, sulky face. “It’s not like I wanted to change,” he said, sounding logical and appearing annoyed that she didn’t get it.

Zenna looked at him sharply. “A month ago you held a steady job as a ski instructor, and now you’re telling me you’re going to become a model and your feelings have changed? That you no longer love me? I’m sorry, Marcos, but it doesn’t make sense. I refuse to accept it.”

She wanted to say more, but checked herself before she actually started begging. Was she supposed to beg? She doubted Marcos would like a woman wrapped around his knees, her snot and tears dripping all over his new shoes.

He sighed heavily, as if the world rested on his shoulders. “Look, Zenna, this isn’t easy for me either. I didn’t ask for this to happen. This woman saw me and offered me a screening, and I got the job. My new agent Monica thinks I have a good chance at acting, too. This is the opportunity of my life. She made me realize there’s more to me than just being the average Joe. I’m worth more than earning pennies teaching irritating vacationers to stay on a snowboard. One thing led to the next...”

He held his hands out in front of him, studying them absentmindedly. “Just try to be happy for me,” he said with a measure of irritation.

“I still don’t understand.” Zenna picked at a strand of hair that had slipped from her ponytail. “So, there’s more to you. How exactly did that change how you feel about me?”

“I did some thinking.”

Zenna waited for his explanation, but none followed. She waited, and then,

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slowly, a realization dawned on her.

“Oh, my God!” she gasped, pulling a couple of strands straight from her scalp. “There’s someone else! You’re in love with her, aren’t you? This isn’t about me or how you’ve changed. This is about her. Suddenly you are someone, and you believe you now deserve someone better than me? That’s it, isn’t it? Now I’m the average Jane and not good enough for a future model/actor!”

“Stop it,” Marcos said through clenched teeth.

Zenna didn’t care that she was screaming now or how much Marcos would hate it. “Is that it?” She slammed her hand on the table. The mug rattled.

“Zenna, please don’t do this...”

Suddenly, she knew, but her need for closure demanded she hear it from his lips. “You son of a bitch. Tell me, Marcos! You owe me that much, you lying, cheating, coward.”

He jerked. “Stop insulting me. I’m not a coward. It took guts to follow my true life path, to change everything.”

“And it didn’t take courage to leave everything I ever owned and loved behind for you? To come to a new country, with no money, and no friends?” She wiped her hands over her face. “Why did you let me come, Marcos? Why didn’t you stop me?”

He got up and walked to the window, his back to her. “I thought I would feel the same if I saw you again, that the distance was too much, that the three months without each other were too long.”

Anger changed into humiliation. “But you didn’t.”

“No,” he shook his head, “I obviously didn’t.”

“Did you fall in love with her?” She already knew the answer, but she wanted him to say it. It was as if she needed to punish herself with his confirmation for her foolishness in trusting him.

Marcos turned, leaning on the windowsill, his muscles tight. “All right. You’re not going to give up so let’s do it your way,” he said heatedly. “I did. I fell in love with her. I’ve never loved anyone like I love her. She’s the one. She’s beautiful, and funny, and clever, and successful, and happy. I am going to marry her. There. You happy, now?”

He cursed and continued in a calmer tone, “I told you to let it go, but you wouldn’t listen. I’m sorry. I wish it wasn’t so, but it is.”

As Zenna allowed herself to be hurt by the reality of all the things the other woman was and she wasn’t, another thought struck her. Her eyes narrowed. “How long have you been seeing Monica?”

“Please, for God’s sake,” he rolled his eyes, “don’t do this, Zenna. What’s the point? You’re making this harder on yourself.”



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She drew in her breath, swallowed air and almost choked. The truth was there in his plea, but she lifted her chin. There was icy control in her voice. "How long?"

Marcos sighed again. He lifted both hands and then dropped them to his hips. He looked at Zenna from under his long eyelashes. "Three months."

Zenna nodded in final defeat. "I see," she said softly. "Since you left me in London."

Marcos shrugged and pushed his hands deep into the pockets of his designer jeans. "Look, it just happened, Zenna. What else do you want me to say? It was destiny. Monica said it was meant to be. I believe that. That's how you have to see it. Our paths were meant to cross, Monica and me. You and I ... us ... well..."

Her eyes held his, accusing. "Yet still, you let me come here. You let me give up everything and come here? You couldn't tell me before?"

Marcos rolled his shoulders like he did when he got impatient. "Zenna, I told you I wasn't sure. I thought I would feel the same about you if I saw you. I was confused. This isn't easy for me either!"

"What am I supposed to do now?" She spoke more to herself than to him. With no job, not enough money to buy a return ticket to London, and not a single friend, she was caught between a rock and a hard place.

Her humiliation drowned in newfound anger. "You bastard." The feeling of helplessness was suffocating, and it infuriated her. The wasted chicken casserole. She was angry for being sad, helpless and suddenly utterly lonely. Pathetic.

"You ... you..." She groped in her mind for insulting words, but she found only a blank. Instead, her hands gripped the fruit bowl and in the next instant she hurled it at him. It barely missed his head as Marcos ducked just in time.

He looked from the bowl spinning on the floor to her, surprise and fury flaring in his eyes. "I gave you an explanation. I said I'm sorry. I even suggested we share the house until we've worked out a practical solution, but I don't have to stay and take your abuse." He grabbed his suede jacket from the chair back, pulling it on as he stomped through the kitchen.

"Where are you going?" she shouted, her tone infused with angst.

"Where the hell do you think I'm going?" he yelled back from the entrance.

Well played. Now she had given him reason to storm out of the house, an easy way out of a sticky mess, a mess he created.

She heard him take his keys from the hook on the jacket stand. When Zenna heard the front door slam, she flung her chair back and followed.

She was just in time to see him unlocking the garden gate. He had taken

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his vintage leather coat. It was flung over his shoulder. That meant he wasn't simply going for a walk around the block to cool off. He was leaving. Marcos was as inseparable from that coat as a baby from his blanket.

Her hand flew to her mouth as she rushed from the warmth of the house through the garden and the gate into the cold street. It was really happening. There was nothing she could do. Her arms fell to her sides.

"That's it!" she called after him, shaking, her fists balled. "Run away, you mouse of a man! You're a coward. You may have perfect hands, but your attitude stinks. Don't face the mess you're leaving behind. Run to your mistress, your little miss perfect, and see how far it's going to get you! Don't think you can ever crawl back here."

She glared at his back as he walked down the road with long strides, his worn jacket fitting smugly over his well-toned shoulders. Then he dealt her the worst insult of all. He didn't look back. He took the turn in the road toward the taxi stand and didn't look back.

Zenna stood in the freezing, early June winter evening, and all she could do was hug herself while she witnessed his abandonment. She watched him until he was out of sight, and then there was no more reason for her to stand in the whipping wind on the pavement, hearing the echo of her voice fading.

Silence once again coated the quiet neighborhood like the snow that had sifted onto the surrounding mountains in the night. Zenna felt empty, lost, and stupid. Where to go? What to do?

Slowly, she turned back to the house. Only then did she notice him, the man standing there. He stood on the pavement in front of her neighbor's house, wearing a black suit and long coat, one hand on a big garden garbage bin, the other shoved into the pocket of his pants. He watched her with open curiosity.

"What are you looking at?" she snapped.

When he simply shrugged, she marched to her gate, suddenly very aware of her flapping slippers. The mountain wind cut through her thin T-shirt. She wanted to escape from the cold and her embarrassment into Marcos' empty house.

A thought stopped her in her tracks. What if she could have prevented Marcos from leaving? It was like a dagger in her heart. She couldn't forgive herself if it was somehow her fault he had fallen for some bimbo named Monica just because she didn't take care of herself.

"Excuse me," she called to the stranger who was wheeling the garbage bin to her neighbor, Ana Rosa's house. He turned, his eyebrows furrowed.

"Say for example," she waved a hand in the direction into which Marcos had disappeared, "that was you. Would you have stayed if I had worn different clothes?" Zenna motioned to her loose tracksuit pants and oversized T-shirt.

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Her eyes scanned an invisible image in the air. “Something black. Yes. Maybe tight. Slick. Sexy. A lower neckline. Would you dump a woman when she looked like that? Maybe I shouldn’t have been quite so sloppy in my ... you know ... appearance.”

His frown turned into a confused smile. “I guess it depends on the man. Even if you did wear it black, slick, and sexy, he may have stayed tonight, but he would have been gone in the morning. Unless he really loved you.”

Did she imagine or did a hint of sadness creep into his voice? She thought about his answer.

“All right,” she drawled, her hands going to her hips, “so my black, slick, and sexy can’t keep a man? What is it with you men?”

She looked at her thighs. She wasn’t fat, but she wasn’t model thin either. She was comfortable. She loved food. Was that a sin? Marcos said Monica was skinny. Probably as thin as a newspaper.

“Do we all have to starve ourselves and become anorexic just to keep a man? Will that make you happy?”

He lifted his hands in a motion of surrender, letting the garbage bin slip to the pavement with a loud bang.

She shrugged. “Argh, just forget it.” She blew a wisp of hair from her eyes. “Well, thanks for nothing. Go back to your dustbin.”

With an animated turn of her hips, she entered her garden and slammed the gate, but not so loud that it washed out her last words.

“Stupid men. All the same.”

Back in the warmth of the kitchen, Zenna supported herself against the wall. This was a bad, bad mess. This was a complicated mess. This was an expensive mess. She had sold all of her earthly belongings to join Marcos in Chile. Every penny had been used to get her here. The piggy bank was empty. It looked like the piggy was going on a diet for a long, long time. Maybe the piggy would end up a sad sack of bones as thin as Monica, if a solution didn’t come to mind fast.

She looked around the posh kitchen with its state of the art finishes. She had told him they couldn’t afford to rent this house. It was far too big for them and the neighborhood way too upmarket, but Marcos was insistent. He was optimistic his luck was about to turn. So much for her luck.

Her eye caught the bottle of red wine she had opened to breathe for dinner. She looked at the oven and the casserole drying out inside. Wine or chicken? She poured a handsome amount of wine into a glass and slid to the floor.

How to move forward, that was the question. She couldn’t go back. Her friends and family had thrown a big farewell party in her honor. She couldn’t pop her head around the door and say ‘Hi, guys, I’m back’, barely three weeks

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later. Then there was her mother... She could already imagine the I-told-you-so look on her face. Her mother had been right about Marcos after all. She simply couldn't swallow that humiliation, too. With no job and no money, what other option did she have? On top of that, she had only just enrolled for the tourism degree at the Universidad Católica de Chile. She had paid the registration, but she still owed the first semester's fee.

Her mind worked overtime, but she saw only one solution. Tomorrow she would cancel her degree application, cut her losses, and run. She would have to call her mother and ask for a bank loan to afford the plane fare. She took a big gulp of the wine. This was bad. This was really bad. Well, her mother didn't name her after one of the bravest heroines of all antiquity for nothing. She'd survive.

She drew a shaky breath, closed her eyes, and laid her head against the wall. There was a familiar, uncomfortable tightening in her chest. The hair on the back of her neck stood erect. Her scalped pricked. NO. She knew it was coming. There was no stopping it. White sparks cut into her inner eyelids. Light slashed into her brain. A split-second image flashed through her mind.

She stared at the face of a man from above, as if she was bent over him. His handsome, boyish features were distorted with pain. Dust clung to his blond hair and powdered the long lashes that framed his moss green eyes. She felt heat, pain, and a stifling sensation of suffocation. The most terrifying was the amplified shaking. Maybe her body was shaking. It was a horrible picture, thick with unearthly feelings of dread. The kaleidoscope of white light became translucent, transforming into the intense physical pain that would drive her insane. She flicked her eyes open. Great, just fabulously great. Her emotional trauma had triggered something she hadn't had since arriving in Chile—an unwanted vision.