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A SIP BEFORE DYING
Wine & Dine Mysteries book #1

by

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CHAPTER ONE

My best friend was waiting for me outside Silver Girl, her jewelry boutique in downtown Sonoma, when I pulled up in my Jeep. Ava Barnett: blonde, bubbly, and as perpetually optimistic as a woman who worked the tourist trade could be. She was dressed today in a flowy floral dress that just skirted her perfectly tanned ankles above boho-style sandals and pink painted toenails. We were both about a size eight, though Ava was on the lithe, athletic side of eight, and I was on the generous, enjoys-her-chocolate side of eight. She floated into my passenger seat on a cloud of peachy lotion and patchouli incense, and I instantly felt my spirits lift as I tried to downplay how rotten that Friday had turned out for me.

"How's things?" she asked, chucking her overnight bag into the back seat of the Wrangler.

I shrugged, tucking some of my flyaways back into my ponytail. While Ava's hair shone, humidity or cloudless sky, my own blonde locks were a fickle bunch. I had my good days, but depending on the weather, they could kink up like Shirley Temple or frizz like Bozo the Clown. Today they were somewhere at a half-Bozo, hence the ponytail to rein them in. "Things are fine," I answered, determined to put on a happy face.

She grinned at me, showing off a row of white teeth with an endearingly chic gap between the front two. "Liar."

I couldn't help the corners of my mouth turning up as well. Joined at the hip since high school, we were more like sisters than best friends. Ava knew me well enough to see through any attempt at downplay.

"Okay, honestly? Things kinda sucked today," I told her.

"Really?" Her big brown eyes turned sympathetic.

I nodded. "Like a Hoover."

"Is it your mom?" she asked.

I bit my lip, feeling a whole new wave of suckatude wash over me at the mention of my mother. But I shut off that emotional faucet before it could completely ruin our planned girls' night. I shook my head. "No, today it was Gene. He was pulling his seesaw act again."

Ava had already heard on multiple occasions how Gene Schulz, my financial consultant, played seesaw with his left and right hands, swinging them up and down alternately as he pictured my winery's financial health. The left hand represented debt, and it always ended up at the highest point when the seesaw gesture stopped. Today's game had ended with the right hand falling even lower than in the past. That was the hand that represented assets—in other words, Oak Valley Vineyard and everything I held dear in this world. All I had inherited after my father passed and Mom's beautiful personality had begun to disintegrate.

The assets in question amounted to just over ten acres of vines and a majestic oak-lined driveway that led to a cluster of low Spanish-style buildings that comprised our winery, my own small cottage, and "the cave," as my namesake, Grandma Emmeline, used to call the wine cellar. Down there in the cool dark was my barreled and bottled stock in trade: Pinot Noir, Chardonnay, Pinot Blanc, Zinfandel, and a few cases of a small run Petite Sirah.

According to Gene, the whole shebang was worth about half a million dollars less than the outstanding debt. We were hanging on by a fraying thread, and I knew only too well that a couple of sexy big commercial wineries were hovering like vultures, waiting to get Oak Valley Vineyard for a song when it went belly-up. Which they fully expected it to do.

Truth be told, sometimes I thought Gene did too.

In my darkest moments after my mom's diagnosis, I'll admit, I had half expected that as well. While I'd excelled at culinary school and spent several years as a personal chef in Los Angeles, the knowledge I had about running a winery could fit in a fortune cookie. Like generations before me, I'd grown up on the land and had a fair understanding of the crops. But I'd been a teenager when I'd left to strike out my own path. Little did I know that at age twenty-nine, that path would end up leading me right back to Sonoma—only now it was up to me to preserve what my family had worked so hard for.

And as long as I was at the helm, belly-up was not an option.

"So what did Seesaw Gene have to say?" Ava asked.

"He said we'll be lucky to break even this year." I tried to keep my eyes on the road as I pulled out. "We're servicing the debt, and we've never defaulted, knock on wood"—I rapped my knuckles on the faux wood center console—"but we're just scraping by."

"Hey, you're getting by! That's not a bad thing."

I shot her a grin. What did I tell you—Miss Optimism, right?

"Unfortunately, getting by will only last so long." I paused, digging deep for a little enthusiasm. "So, we need to kick it up a notch."

Ava arched one delicate blonde eyebrow at me. "Which is where I come in?"

I nodded. "This weekend, you are my social wheel greaser, mood lifter, and all around hostess with the mostest." I sent her a sympathetic glance. "Sorry, you'll be run ragged, girl."

If she dreaded it, she didn't show it, just giving me another breezy smile. "What are friends for?"

"Have I mentioned lately how much I love you?"

Ave laughed. "Say it with a bottle of your 2012 Blanc, and I'm yours."

"Done," I promised.

The following day was the first event in my grand plan to revive Oak Valley Vineyard, our unofficial re-launch. My aim was to show the local enthusiasts that, while we put out wine to rival any of the big boys in town, we were also a charming venue for parties, weddings, and retreats. And the food wasn't half bad either.

"So, what's on the agenda tonight?" Ava asked.

"Well, I think we should start with that 2012 bottle."

"I concur!"

"And then I'm thinking it's a *Thelma & Louise* night."

"Wow, we're at T&L level?" Ava patted my shoulder. "Must have been a really bad meeting with Gene."

I nodded. "We're gonna need comfort food too." Friday night was no time to count calories.

Ava raised her eyebrow my way again. "Pizza?"

I laughed. "I was thinking more like bacon wrapped scallops. With bacon Brussels. And chocolate dipped bacon." I did mention I was on the *generous* side of a size 8.

Ava shrugged. "Okay, you're the boss."

"*Tomorrow* I'm the boss," I corrected her. "Tonight all I want is some Gina Davis and a girl's night."

"That," Ava said, "I can do."

CHAPTER TWO

The following morning I was up before dawn, walking Conchita, my house manager, and the three local day servers I'd hired for the event through the finer points of my [Spanish Style Paella](#) recipe at an improvised fireplace of loose bricks at the edge of the vineyard.

We had a private tasting slated for that afternoon, after which I'd be serving a Spanish meal, all cooked outdoors on wood fires, like the Valencians of the Orange Blossom Coast did at seaside picnics—or at least that was what I would be telling my guests in order to add a European flair to the evening. I planned to serve the meal family-style, outdoors on rustic-chic wooden tables under the trees, and paired with an ice-cold pitcher of sangria at each table made of our Zinfandel, club soda, a splash of brandy, and a pinch of sugar.

"I think we should prepare all the components of the paella in advance, before final assembly," I mused out loud to Conchita. "Brown the meats and have the *sofrito* bubbling away."

Conchita nodded, her salt-and-pepper hair bobbing up and down in the loose bun at the back of her plump neck. She'd been at the winery as long as I could remember, and I almost thought of her as a second mother. Though, with her envious dark tan and Hispanic heritage, she looked the polar opposite of my blue-eyed, bought-sunscreen-in-bulk self. Conchita was married to Hector Villarreal, our vineyard manager, who'd been a fixture at Oak Valley Vineyard since boyhood. I'd learned a lot about the vines from him growing up, and I'd even been the flower girl when he married Conchita. While some might refer to the couple as staff, to me they were family. Some days they almost felt like all the family I had left.

I ignored that downer, though, as Conchita and I worked side by side, adding a splash of oil to a hot pan, along with a finely chopped mixture of onion and seeded tomato, some sweet peppers, and a hint of crushed garlic and parsley. I seasoned it with salt and pepper and a few threads of fragrant saffron then fried it until the *sofrito*—or fry-up—began to form a paste.

"That smells amazing," Conchita told me.

I nodded. "From your mouth to our guests' ears."

She patted my back. "Don't worry. You know they are going to love this."

Love to eat? Yes. Love enough to book their next big event here? I could only hope.

I left the food in Conchita's capable hands and excused myself to get ready for the VIP guests I'd be meeting that day, including local influencers, bloggers, and reporters, as well as socialites, Silicon Valley billionaires, and wine enthusiasts.

No pressure there.

I showered and threw on my usual minimal-but-tasteful makeup routine. I prayed for a good hair day, as I attempted to de-frizz via copious hair products. Which was at least mildly successful. Then I slid on a flattering navy shift dress and a pair of red pumps with low heels, as a concession to the amount of walking I'd be doing on the grass that afternoon. I capped it off with Grammy Em's pearl drop earrings and stood back to assess

my reflection. I took a deep breath, praying I could project confidence and not the bundle of nerves I could feel brewing in my stomach.

Fifteen minutes later, I was standing in the circular drive at the head of the estate, awaiting our first guest. Ava was by my side in a clinging forest green sheath, showing one of her own silver crescent moon pendants above a moderate-to-serious amount of cleavage. She squeezed my hand and gave me a fortifying smile as the sound of the first set of tires crunching up the gravel drive approached.

Vivienne Price-Pennington arrived precisely on time in a big white Rolls Royce. While I'd seen her name in the society pages of our local lifestyle magazine, this was the first time I'd encountered the software billionaire in person. Like many of Silicon Valley's elite, she had a second home here in wine country. The CEO of Price Digital was only a couple of inches taller than my own 5'5", but she seemed to take up a lot of space, her personality radiating from her as she stepped from the vehicle in tailored silk and signature red-soled Louboutins. She had a good fifteen to twenty years on me, and the tight fit of her dress over her hips, the extensions in her dyed auburn hair, and the predatory gleam in her eye all said cougar with a capital C. Which she could well afford to be, her first three companies having been bought out by Microsoft, Apple, and Intel.

She was accompanied by a young man with dark hair that fell rebelliously into his eyes as he surveyed the vineyard with a perma-scowl on his features. It was a look I'd seen often on the young, idle, and rich in the Bay Area. Beside him stood an older woman with a pinched smile. She wore her A-line skirt and blazer like a starched uniform, complete with hat and gloves, looking almost like a caricature of a society lady on a weekend picnic.

"Mrs. Price-Pennington," I said, reaching to shake my first VIP's hand. "It's a pleasure to finally meet you."

She nodded, glancing behind me at the winery, as if assessing its worth. "Please, call me Vivienne. And it's a pleasure to be here. I've heard good things about your small run Petite Sirah."

"I'll be sure to set a case aside for you," I promised, knowing full well who she'd heard it from. While Gene "Seesaw" Shultz might have his doubts about our long-term solvency, he knew how to push an investment. He'd supplied many of the names on our guest list of the wine loving elite in Sonoma.

"This is my son, David," Vivienne said, gesturing to the younger man.

He nodded awkwardly, as if just "my son, David" was a label he was well used to wearing. I shook his hand, which was slightly sweaty despite the cool spring air.

"And this is my mother, Alison Price."

Alison gave me a gloved hand that had a surprisingly firm grip. Like her daughter, she was tall, though her hair was a duller brown shot with a generous amount of white. Her face looked naturally lined and Botox-free, though her spine was straight and strong. If I had to guess, I put the baby boomer around seventy, though there was nothing frail looking about the senior citizen.

"How do you do?" she asked, clearly not caring what the answer to that question was as she quickly turned her attention away from me and toward her grandson. "David, please get my bag from the trunk."

His scowl deepened, but he ducked back toward the car to obey.

I quickly introduced Ava to the women and told Vivienne, "Ava's on your table. If you need anything, she'll see to it."

Vivienne nodded. "I'm looking forward to this Spanish theme of yours. I've just been back from Europe, so I'm intrigued to see your take on it."

While it was phrased as a statement, it almost came off as a dare. One I planned to take on, guns blazing. "I'm sure you'll enjoy it." I shot her a smile that I hoped was a lot more confident than I felt.

If she noted any of the nerves coursing through me, she didn't mention them, instead gesturing back down the driveway the way she'd come. "My husband, Chas, was held up at work, so he'll be coming later in the Lamborghini. I'm sure he'll be here in time for the picnic, even if he happens to miss the tasting."

I nodded, mentally making a note to treat anyone arriving in a Lamborghini as Price-Pennington royalty. "We'll be sure to direct him to your table when he arrives."

Ava and I ushered the party into the tasting bar, where my bar manager and wine steward, Jean Luc, was preparing his stand-up enologist act. Though, as I'd learned when I'd hired him on last year, Jean Luc preferred the term *sommelier* to wine steward. In fact, I'd quickly learned that Jean Luc preferred the French term for anything to the English. While pretension practically dripped from his thick accent, customers ate it up with silver spoons, today being no exception as I saw Mrs. Price actually crack a genuine smile as he complimented her flower studded hat. My hired day help poured samples for the other guests, and Jean Luc laid on the charm, talking up the Pinot Noir and Chardonnay we had in glass to Vivienne.

I left Ava in the tasting bar to help Jean Luc and slipped outside to stand at the top end of the avenue and say a mental prayer for success, on the lookout for more cars. One by one they arrived, playing out much as the meeting with Vivienne had. Guests had never been here but were curious to see how the little winery with a growing reputation would pull it off today. The more people who arrived, the more I felt like I was on the job interview of a lifetime. This one meal could make or break our word of mouth.

I wasn't sure if all the guests had arrived, but I had run a rough car count, which came out to at least thirty influential people, all squeezed into the tasting bar, mingling and murmuring amongst themselves. The atmosphere in that little bar was heady, as if the very air had an alcohol content. The wine jargon flowed whenever the crowd of like-minded enthusiasts took a short break from sniffing and sipping. They pulled all the faces you'd expect to see at tastings—pouting and puffing their cheeks, breathing in through the nose over a mouthful of my Chardonnay, squeezed between tongue and palate. They gargled the contents of their glasses and talked about the "robe," the "nose," and the "legs."

I turned and walked back to the kitchen, where Conchita was busy organizing the covered plates of paella components and urging the staff on as they transferred the ingredients to a long table under the trees. Outside, I check the fires in a line of six improvised brick barbecues. Chicken pieces were browning in the sizzling pans, and the rustic tables were all laid, complete with place cards, flowers, and a central board on each, to bear the heat of the pan.

Back in the tightly packed tasting bar, I asked Ava to keep an eye on the proceedings outside, as I threaded my way through the huddled guests, meeting and greeting. Hector had joined Jean Luc and was fielding questions like a pro. One man I

recognized as a reporter for *Sonoma Wine Life* asked if the wine would have any taint from the ash and smoke of the previous year's monster wildfires, which had devastated enormous tracts of northern California.

Hector put the newspaperman's fears to rest by saying, "The wines on offer had gone into bottle long before the fires broke out. As for the crop yet to be harvested, time will tell, ladies and gentlemen. It will take a couple of years before we'll know if there's a taint. Let's cross that bridge when we come to it. Personally, I'm inclined to think that Mother Nature will shrug off the effects of the fires."

The reporter smiled, obviously pleased with the answer, and sipped from his glass. I let a moment of relief rush over me.

A short moment.

Ava appeared at my side and whispered, "More guests just arrived, in a sports car."

"Lamborghini?"

Ava shrugged. "Beats me. All I know is it was bright yellow and flashy, and the driver was positively yummy. If he'd arrived alone, you know I would be talking to him right now and not you." She winked at me.

I grinned back. "Down, girl."

She held her hands up in surrender. "Hey, I'm just saying." She paused, nodding toward the doorway. "That's him."

I had to admit, Ava was right. The man filling the doorway was hot enough to start his own wildfires. Dark blond hair, just long enough on top to be stylish but short enough on the sides to feel GQ. His skin was tanned, jaw square, shoulders broad. He could have been a male model, complete with the perpetually bored look on his face as he surveyed the crowd.

But it was the short brunette at his side that caught my attention. She wore a simple sundress, low-heeled sandals, and was one of the only women in the room *not* carrying a purse sporting a designer logo. I recognized her instantly, though it had been a good decade since I'd seen her. Jennifer Pacheco had been a couple of years behind me in school, and we'd taken choir together my senior year. I remembered her as a shy, quiet kind of girl, though she'd had the voice of an angel.

"Jenny?" I asked, approaching.

She turned a pair of big blue eyes my way, recognition dawning on her side as well. "Emmy!" She gave me a quick hug. "So good to see you again."

"You too. How have you been?" My eyes must have flitted up to her companion, as she immediately introduced him.

"Oh, Emmy, this is my brother, Chas. Chas Pennington."

I blinked, trying to cover my surprise. Pennington, as in my VIP's husband. The cover model beside Jenny was at best a flirty thirty. Several years Vivienne's junior.

"*Half* brother," Chas corrected Jenny, sticking a hand out toward me. "Charmed."

"Nice to meet you," I said, trying to find the resemblance between the two.

"Is my wife here?" he asked, his eyes going to the crowd again.

"Yes, I, uh, believe she's with my wine steward, Jean Luc." I pointed to the bar.

Chas turned his bored look toward his *half* sister, and his eyes softened. "I'll catch up with you later?"

Jenny nodded. "Go. I know how Vivienne hates you being late."

Chase snorted but gave his sister a quick kiss on the cheek before heading toward my VIP.

"I didn't know you had brother," I said as I watched him walk away. I had to admit, the rear view of his perfectly fitted slacks was not entirely a terrible one. Vivienne knew how to pick them.

Jenny nodded. "You wouldn't have. He lived with his mom in Fremont when we were in high school, so he wasn't at Sonoma Valley High. Plus, we have different last names, of course."

I nodded. "Did Chas take his mother's name?"

Jenny laughed. "No, Pennington was our landlord's name. Chas had his legally changed after high school. Thought it would get him farther in life than Pacheco." She paused, glancing across the room at her half brother, who was accepting a glass of wine from Jean Luc. "As usual, Chas was right."

"Well, you seem close now," I observed.

She smiled. "We are. After Mom and Dad moved to Scottsdale, Chas and Vivienne were a godsend." She paused. "Dad's health hasn't been great."

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that." If I recalled correctly, Jenny had come from humble beginnings. Her mother had been a housekeeper at one of the local hotels, and her—and apparently Chas's—father had been a farmworker. I could well imagine years of hard labor in the California sun could take a toll on one's health.

"Thanks. He's doing better in the dry climate." She smiled through the obvious pain in her eyes. "And, of course, the cost of living is a lot lower in Arizona, so that's a plus."

I glanced at Chas, greeting his billionaire wife with air kisses—the scene so far removed from cost-of-living conscious farmworkers that it could have been a different planet.

She must have read my thoughts, as Jenny immediately jumped to Chas's defense. "Oh, Chas helps out whenever he can. In fact, he even got Vivienne to get me a job at Price Digital."

I gave her a reassuring smile. "That sounds very generous of him," I told her.

Jenny relaxed. "Yes, well, that's Chas."

I spied Conchita hailing me from the doorway to the kitchen.

"It was lovely to see you again, but if you'll excuse me, duty calls." I gave Jenny a quick hug and threaded my way through the growing crowd.

Outside, clouds of fragrant steam rose from the paelleras as they were transferred to the six tables, to rest under white cloths. The flamenco guitarist I'd hired began playing a soft, inviting song that lured more guests outside, and I trotted up and down beside the filling tables, handing out bowls of cut lemons and making sure everyone was served a generous portion of the meal.

At the Price-Pennington table, Ava sat between Jenny and Chas, who appeared in godlike sculptural profile, closely examining my best buddy's crescent moon pendant—or perhaps the bosom beneath it. David sat on the other side of Chas, scowling their direction, though whether it was directly in relation to his stepfather or at life in general, I couldn't tell. Alison was commenting on the bottle of Petite Sirah Jean Luc had pulled from our privet reserve especially for Vivienne, and Jenny was looking distinctly

uncomfortable in her surroundings. I wondered at her reasons for being in attendance—if it had been Vivienne's idea or Chas's.

I watched as Chas tossed back a glass of the Sirah like it was water, then reached for a refill. The pitcher of ice-cold sangria hadn't been touched. I made a mental note to ready another bottle from the cellar in case Chas flattened the first one before his wife could take a ladylike sip or two.

I worked the tables as the afternoon wore on, making sure my guests were happy. I heard plenty of compliments and was pleased to see that a few of my picnic invitees had taken photos of gorgeous paellas, hopefully to share on their social media pages and tag me as the creator.

As soon as I was sure the guests were satisfied, I snuck a glass of sangria and nibbled on a leg of chicken. The afternoon light was beginning to turn gold as the *flan y fruta* was served.

That was when Bradley Wu waddled up to embrace me. His tweed jacket always has a faint fragrance of Turkish tobacco. Brad was a syndicated food columnist with a large online following. The man had incredible taste buds and a vocabulary to match. He once described the history of wine country as, *What began as a low-budget black and white spaghetti western, evolved into a technicolor widescreen blockbuster with an all-star cast and several self-indulgent musical numbers...*

I could only hope he saw my current offerings as Oscar-worthy dramas and not B-movie musicals.

"Emmy, darling!" he hailed me, throwing air kisses at both my cheeks. "I gorged on your creation, and to compensate, I shall be counting calories all next week. But not all the guests have a full appreciation of your achievement. Would you believe, just a few minutes ago, a very ignorant lady referred to your paella as 'seafood rice.' What a philistine insult to a cultural monument! This paella is the culminating triumph of the baroque imagination, as expressed in the culinary arts." He sighed.

I couldn't help but smile. "I'm so pleased you enjoyed it," I said. "Have a sit down and a sip of my Petite Sirah—it'll tan your tongue into belt leather."

"That, I shall look forward to with great pleasure!" He kissed my hand and went back to his table under the trees.

I spent the rest of the afternoon mingling, chatting with guests, and making sure glasses were never empty. As the sun began to sink below the trees in a watercolor painting of pink, oranges, and delicate purples, guests started to trickle toward the driveway, making their way back to town or, in the case of those who had *really* enjoyed the tasting, calling cars to safely transport them home.

I watched Vivienne and her entourage readying to leave. Vivienne swayed unsteadily on her heels, Alison supporting her with one arm. I noted that Jenny was with them now, taking over the role as designated driver and slipping into the front of the car.

"I hope you enjoyed yourselves," I told Vivienne as I approached.

She nodded, her cheeks slightly flushed. "Quite. The winery is lovely, Emmy," she said, sweeping her arms toward the growing vines.

"Thank you," I told her sincerely. "I hope you keep us in mind for your next event."

She nodded. "Oh, be sure that I will," she said as David held the passenger door open for her. "Hector tells me the Sirah is in limited supply?"

I nodded. "Yes, but Hector's been growing more of that varietal, so we'll be making more limited batches."

She nodded. "Good to know."

It wasn't exactly an order, but I took it as interest.

She got into her seat, slightly less than graciously, and I watched David get into the back seat without so much as a look my direction. If I had to guess, he'd long ago hit his limit of small talk with his mother's crowd.

I waved goodbye to Jenny as I watched the car slide away down the avenue into the gathering dusk.

I found Ava in the kitchen, her heels on the floor beside her as she nibbled bits of leftover flan.

"They gone yet?" she asked.

I nodded. "The lingerers are leaving now. I think Vivienne might have been the last holdout. But," I added hopefully, "she seemed to have enjoyed herself."

Ava held her hand up to slap me a high five. "Nicely done!"

"I couldn't have done it without you," I told her.

"That's true." Ava nodded. "I'm exhausted. How do you think it went?"

I crossed my fingers. "So far so good. I guess we'll really know when booking orders start coming in."

"I saw Bradley scarfing paella like it was going out of style," she said, scooping a bit of caramel up with her index finger. "I hope that means he's planning a good review."

"Ditto." I peeked into the almost empty pan and dipped a finger full of caramel myself. "How did things go at the Price-Pennington table?"

"Now there's a stoic bunch." Ava rolled her eyes. "Lots of pleasantries and small talk. Tennis, bridge, the latest gossip from the club, repeat."

"Any of it about the Sirah?"

Ava nodded. "Chas certainly seemed to like it. I think he was getting a bit tipsy as he told me about his golf handicap," she added.

"The wine wasn't the only thing he seemed to like." I shot her a grin.

"He's a married man, Emmy."

"Who had a healthy appreciation for your cleavage."

"He was admiring my pendant," Ava protested.

"Sure."

Ave gave me friendly punch in the shoulder. "Please. You know I'm not into the country club set. He's not my type."

I raised an eyebrow her way. "That's not what you said when he pulled up in the sports car."

"Okay, okay. I'll admit, he's hot."

"Even *I* would admit that," I said, ignoring how long it had been since I'd been with a hot guy.

"But he's so pretentious. Every other word was a name drop. I swear the conversation was specifically designed to make me feel intimidated by his enormous..."

My other eyebrow rose.

"...ego," she finished with a sweet smile.

I laughed. "Well, as long as his wife had a good time—"

"And books her next corporate event here," Ava cut in.

"—*and* buys a few cases of Sirah, that's all that matters."

"I'm sure she did, and I hope she will," Ava told me, licking her finger.

I left Ava in the kitchen and made my way to the tasting bar, where I helped Jean Luc with the remains of the party. An hour later, we had the big cleanup done, and the day caterers had been paid, thanked, and tipped for their hard work. Conchita had put away the last of the heavy cast-iron pans, and Hector had doused the outside fires.

I made my rounds, locking doors, turning out lights, and shutting the main buildings down for the evening. I bid Jean Luc good night and closed the tasting room, then made my way to the cave to secure the cellar.

I was just about to throw the big toggle switch that controlled all the lights, when something caught my eye. A broken wineglass sat on the red clay tiles across the room, where rows of oak barrels stood under sandstone arches. I frowned. No one was supposed to be drinking down here. I crossed the room, my heels clacking on the floor as I passed the foot of an old vertical hundred-gallon barrel once used for aging Zinfandel.

Just on the other side, I spied the guilty party. Slumped on the floor sat the drunken blond godling, Chas Pennington. I swallowed down annoyance at the idea Chas thought he could help himself to our private reserves. Especially after guzzling the Petite Sirah as he had.

"Mr. Pennington?" I called. "We need to get you up now."

No response.

"Mr. Pennington?" I said louder. I leaned forward and jostled his shoulder, causing his head to loll backward.

I stifled a gasp as his face turned toward mine. His eyes were wide open, staring at the ceiling in an unseeing gaze, his lips blue, his skin ice cold.

Chas Pennington wasn't dead drunk...he was just dead.

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RECIPES

Emmy's Spanish Style Paella

2 tablespoons olive oil
1 tablespoon sweet or smoked paprika
2 teaspoons oregano
salt and pepper to taste
1 frying chicken, cut into pieces (roughly 3 lbs.)
1/4 cup extra-virgin olive oil
2 Spanish chorizo sausages, thickly sliced
1 onion, diced
1 red bell pepper, finely chopped
2 cloves of crushed garlic
1 bunch flat-leaf parsley leaves, chopped, reserve some for garnish
1 (15 oz) can diced or crushed tomatoes, drained
4 cups short grain Spanish rice
6 cups water, warm
generous pinch of saffron threads
8 mussels, scrubbed
1/2 pound jumbo shrimp, peeled and deveined
1/2 cup frozen peas
lemon wedges, for serving

In a medium bowl, combine the paprika, oregano, the 2 tablespoons of olive oil, and salt and pepper, and coat the chicken in the mixture. Then marinate the chicken in the refrigerator. (This can be done up to a day ahead.)

Heat the olive oil in a large pan or paella pan over medium-high heat. Sauté the chorizo until browned, then remove and set aside. Heat the shrimp for roughly 2 minutes, until pink, and set aside. Cook the chicken, skin-side down, until browned on all sides. While cooking, season with more salt and pepper. When browned, remove from pan and set aside.

In the same pan, prepare the sofrito. Sauté the onions, red pepper, and parsley until onions begin to get soft, about 3 minutes. Add tomatoes and cook until the mixture begins to caramelize and thicken a bit. Then add in the rice, coating all of the grains in the tomato mixture. Add in water, chicken, sausage, and saffron, and bring to a simmer for about 10 minutes, stirring frequently so the rice cooks evenly. Add mussels to pan, nestling them into rice mixture. Cook about 5 minutes or until the shells open. Nestle the shrimp into the rice mixture and add the frozen peas. Cook about 5–10 minutes or until shrimp are done and rice is cooked.

When the rice looks fluffy and moist, turn the heat up for just a few seconds until you can smell the rice toasting (but not burning) at the bottom of the pan. This is called the *socarrat*.

Remove from heat and garnish with lemon wedges and additional parsley.

While Emmy was cooking this in bulk for her Spanish event, this recipe serves 8.

Shortcuts!

If you want a simpler version to make at home, you can use boneless, skinless chicken breast and purchase your shrimp already peeled and deveined. Clams can be substituted for mussels—you can even use canned ones. You can cook the chorizo, chicken (cut into bit-sized pieces), and shrimp all in the same pan together—adding the chicken first, then chorizo, and finally shrimp, which takes the least time to cook. Use Minute Rice to cut down on cooking time!

Wine Pairings

Best served paired with chilled, fruity wines, like a rosé or Sauvignon Blanc, or a chilled sangria like the one Emmy prepared. Some of Emmy's other suggestions: Kendall-Jackson Vintner's Reserve Rosé, Chateau d'Esclans Côtes de Provence Whispering Angel Rosé, Sterling Sauvignon Blanc Napa.