

The Vineyard House

by Lenora Vale

She inherited half a house. He inherited the other half. Neither is selling.

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The inheritance was equal. The opinion about what to do with it was not.

Theo Marchetti wanted to sell the vineyard property immediately, split the proceeds, and move on. His cousin's ex-wife — Camille Forrest, who had apparently been kept in the will regardless, which his cousin had obviously not expected to matter — wanted to renovate it and lease it as a wedding venue.

Neither of them could sell without the other's signature. Neither of them could renovate without the other's signature. They were, in the precise legal language of the estate solicitor, required to reach consensus.

The solicitor had wished them both the very best of luck with that.

The property was in the south of France, which would have been straightforwardly appealing if Camille hadn't spent the first two hours of the first day pointing out structural problems with an expertise that Theo had not expected from someone whose professional background was interior design.

"The north wall," she said, not looking at him, running her hand along the plaster, "is damp from a failed drainage channel that someone laid incorrectly in approximately 1987. If we sell without addressing it, we'll disclose and the sale price drops. If we don't disclose, we'll have legal problems."

"So we fix it and then sell," he said.

"Fixing it will take four weeks and cost fifteen thousand euros." She turned. She had the quality of someone who had expected to be underestimated and had decided on a policy of preemptive competence. Dark hair, work clothes that were already dusty, and an expression that was reserving judgment. "During which time we both need to be on site to authorise contractors and manage decisions. Neither of us can do this remotely — the estate solicitor specified physical presence."

"I know what the solicitor specified."

"Then you know we're here for at least four weeks."

"I know," he said. "I don't have to like it."

"I don't particularly like it either," she said, and turned back to the wall.

He looked at her back for a moment. His cousin had described Camille as difficult, which Theo was starting to think had been a projection.

The farmhouse had two bedrooms, which they divided without drama. The kitchen was shared, which was the actual drama, because they both apparently cooked.

"You don't have to make dinner," she said, the first evening, finding him already at the stove.

"I'm making dinner for myself," he said. "There's enough for two if you want some."

She looked at the pot, which was a slow-braise that had been going for two hours and smelled considerably better than she'd expected. "What is it?"

"Lamb. My grandmother's recipe."

"Your grandmother is Sicilian."

He looked at her. "How did you know that?"

"Marco talked about her constantly," she said. "She sounds formidable."

"She is," he said. "Sit down. There's wine."

She sat. The wine was from the estate's own surviving vines, which produced something simple and good. They ate without the performance of friendliness, which Theo found, surprisingly, more comfortable than friendliness would have been.

"You know about the property," he said. "More than I expected."

"I spent time here," she said. "Before the marriage ended. I liked it." She looked at her wine glass. "I like it more than Marco did, as it turned out."

"Is that why it went to you."

"I think he expected the will to be renegotiated before it became relevant," she said, with a flatness that was not quite bitter and was clearly the result of having arrived at the flatness through something that had been bitter. "He was wrong about a lot of things."

Theo looked at her. His cousin, whom he'd known all his life, was not someone he was going to defend in this specific context.

"He was wrong about the drainage channel too," Theo said. "You're right that it needs fixing."

She looked at him, slightly startled.

"I had a surveyor look at the plans before I came," he said. "Your assessment was correct."

"You had a surveyor—"

"I came prepared," he said. "I expected to disagree with everything you said. I wanted evidence."

The corner of her mouth moved. "And?"

"You've been right about everything so far," he said. "I reserve judgment on the venue concept."

"The venue concept will work," she said. "I've done the market analysis."

"Show me the market analysis," he said.

She looked at him. "That's the first reasonable thing you've said today."

"I've been saving it," he said.

She looked at him for a moment more, and then she went and got her laptop, and they spent the evening going through the numbers, which were, he had to admit, solid.

Three weeks in, the drainage channel was fixed and the north wall was drying and the venue concept was more than a concept — it was a business plan that two different hospitality groups had expressed interest in reviewing.

Three weeks in, they had also developed the specific vocabulary of two people who had been in close proximity through difficulty. The shorthand. The way she left him coffee before he was up on contractor days. The way he fixed things she hadn't asked him to fix — a door that stuck, a drawer that had defeated her three times — without mentioning it. The evenings on the terrace with the vineyard wine and the argument about whether the east section of the vines was salvageable (it was; she was right).

He was aware of her in the way of something he was managing carefully. He was fairly sure she was managing the same thing, because he'd known her for three weeks and she was careful about most things.

On the twenty-third day, the last contractor left at eight PM and they opened the second-to-last bottle of the estate wine and sat on the terrace and the evening was very warm and the vineyard in the dusk was the specific colour that good things are at the end of the day.

"We should talk about the offer," she said.

"We should," he said. "Which one."

"Both." She turned her wine glass. "The sale offer is fair. The venue lease is better long-term."

"I know."

"So you're not selling."

"I'm not selling," he confirmed. "I was never going to sell once I saw the analysis."

She looked at him. "You've been arguing for selling for three weeks."

"I was testing the argument," he said. "You kept winning."

"You're infuriating," she said. Not with heat. More like information.

"You're the best person I've argued with in years," he said. Also information.

The terrace. The vineyard. The dusk.

"Theo," she said.

"Yes."

"I'm not going to do anything stupid."

"Neither am I," he said. "Probably."

She kissed him, which was one interpretation of probably, and he kissed her back with three weeks of managed awareness, and the terrace was very warm.

What followed was good in the way of things that have been correctly anticipated — thorough and genuine and specifically them. She said his name and he said hers and neither of them was managing anything anymore, which was a relief.

Afterwards, the vineyard was dark and the wine was done and the venue business plan was on the table where they'd left it.

"The east vines," she said, to the dark.

"Are salvageable," he said. "Yes."

She laughed. He felt it against his shoulder.

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The farmhouse, four weeks ago, had been a problem to be solved. Tonight it was something else. The morning would be contracts and signatures and calls to hospitality groups. Tonight it was wine-dark and specific and the right kind of complicated.

"I'm staying," he said. "For the renovation. You should know that."

"I know," she said. "I've known since the drainage channel."

"You could have told me."

"I wanted to see if you'd figure it out," she said.

He looked at the dark vineyard. "Your market analysis," he said. "What's the projected first-year occupancy."

"Seventy-two percent," she said.

"Show me the assumptions tomorrow," he said.

"I will," she said.

Outside, the vineyard. Inside, the farmhouse. A business plan on the table and two signatures it needed.

They'd get to it.
