

New York Times bestselling author of *Lake News*

BARBARA
DELINSKY



A Novel

THE
VINEYARD

About the Author

BARBARA DELINSKY has published more than sixty-six novels since the 1980s, including, most recently, *Lake News*, *Coast Road*, *Three Wishes*, *A Woman's Place*, *For My Daughters*, and *More Than Friends*. Published in twenty-five languages worldwide, her books regularly appear on the bestseller lists of *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, the *Washington Post*, and *Publishers Weekly*. Delinsky is a lifelong New Englander. She and her husband have three sons. Readers can write to her at P.O. Box 812894, Wellesley, Massachusetts, USA 02482-0026; or visit her Web site: www.barbaradelinsky.com.

PRAISE FOR

*Barbara
Delinsky*

AND HER NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

LAKE NEWS

"[An] engaging tale."

—*People*

"Delinsky spins another engrossing story of strength in the face of cataclysmic life changes."

—*Library Journal*

"Delightful. . . . Readers will be sorry to reach the end of *Lake News* and yearn for more about its cast and characters."

—*The Pilot* (Southern Pines, NC)

"Delinsky plots this satisfying, gentle romance with the sure hand of an expert, scattering shady pasts and dark secrets among some of her characters while giving others destructive family patterns and difficult family dynamics to contend with."

—*Publishers Weekly*

"An enjoyable novel. . . . Delinsky is one of those writers who knows how to introduce characters to her readers in such a way that they become more like old friends than works of fiction."

—*Flint Journal* (MI)

"Filled with romance, intrigue, revenge, and salvation, *Lake News* is a gripping tale sure to please [Delinsky's] legions of loyal fans and earn her quite a few new ones."

—BookPage

"Recommended. . . . Lily Blake [is] a remarkable heroine."

—Abilene Reporter-News (TX)

COAST ROAD

"A winner. . . . Delinsky delivers an emotion-packed journey . . . firmly cementing her status as a bestselling writer of top-notch books."

—Booklist

"The road to recovery for both Jack and Rachel makes for a heartwarming story."

—Star Tribune (Minneapolis)

"Recommended. . . . Delinsky's latest love story is filled with heartache, self-discovery, and renewal."

—Library Journal

"A remarkable journey. . . . Delinsky delves deeper into the human heart and spirit with each new novel."

—Cincinnati Enquirer

"A beautiful love story. . . . Delinsky is one of the twentieth century's best writers."

—Amazon.com

THREE WISHES

"[A] heartwarming, tear-jerking small-town romance."

—*Kirkus Reviews*

"A touching and delightful new novel. . . . A story of genuine love, sacrifice, redemption, and the cohesiveness of life in a small town."

—*Chattanooga Times (TN)*

"[A] heartwarming novel . . . Delinsky's prose is spare, controlled, and poignant as she evokes the simplicity and joys of small-town life."

—*Publishers Weekly*

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ALSO BY BARBARA DELINSKY

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A Woman's Place

Shades of Grace

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For My Daughters

Suddenly

More Than Friends

The Passions of Chelsea Kane

A Woman Betrayed





The Vineyard

A NOVEL

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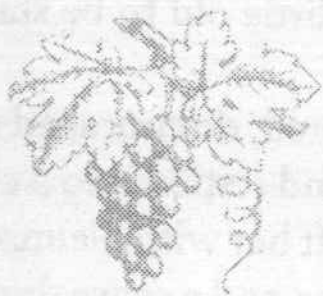
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One

ON WHAT HAD BEGUN as just another June day in Manhattan, Susanne Seebring Malloy returned to her Upper East Side brownstone after lunch with friends to find a saffron yellow envelope in the mail. She knew it was from her mother, even without the vineyard logo in the upper left corner or her mother's elegant script in the address. Between the Asquonset, Rhode Island, postmark and the scent of Natalie's trademark freesia, there was no doubt at all.

Susanne stepped out of her Ferragamos and curled her toes in dismay. A letter from her mother was the last thing she needed. She would look at it later. She was feeling hollow enough as it was.

And whose fault was that? she asked herself, irrationally annoyed. It was *Natalie's* fault. Natalie had lived her life by the book, doing everything just so. She had been the most dutiful wife Susanne had ever seen—and she had been Susanne's role model. So Susanne had become a dutiful wife herself. By the time the women's movement had taken hold, she was so busy catering to Mark and the kids that she didn't have time for a career. Now the children were grown and resented her intrusion, and Mark had staff to do the small things she used to do. She still traveled with him sometimes, but though he

claimed to love having her along, he didn't truly need her there. She was window dressing. Nothing more.

She had time for a career now. She had the energy. But she was fifty-six, for goodness sake. Fifty-six was a little old to be starting a career.

So where did that leave her? she wondered, discouraged now as she took the new catalogues from the mail and settled into a chair by the window overlooking the courtyard. It left her with Neiman Marcus, Bloomingdale's, Hammacher Schlemmer, and a sense that somehow, somewhere, she had missed the boat.

She should ask her mother about *that*, she thought dryly—as if Natalie would sympathize with boredom or understand restlessness. And even if she did, Natalie didn't discuss problems. She discussed clothing. She discussed wallpaper. She discussed bread-and-butter letters on engraved stationery. She was an expert on manners.

So was Susanne. But she was fed up with those things. They were dull. They were petty. They were as irrelevant as the bouillabaisse she had cooked yesterday before remembering that Mark had a dinner meeting, or the cache of hors d'oeuvres and pastries she had prepared in the past six months and frozen for the guests who never came anymore—and speaking of food, if Natalie was sending her the menu for the vineyard's Fall Harvest Feast, Susanne would scream.

Ripe for a fight, she pushed herself out of the chair and retrieved the yellow envelope from the hall table. Mail from her mother was common. Natalie was forever sending copies of reviews of one Asquonset wine or another, and if not a review, then a personal letter of praise from a vintner in California or France—though Susanne wasn't interested in any of it. The vineyard was her parents' pride and joy, not hers. She had spent decades trying to convince them of that. Lobbying efforts to get her involved, like most else in her life, had grown old.

But this envelope was different. It was of the same heavy stock that Natalie favored, but its color—deep yellow with dark blue ink—was a far cry from the classic ivory with burgundy ink of usual Asquonset mailings. And it wasn't addressed to Susanne alone. It was addressed to Mr. and Mrs. Mark Malloy in a calligrapher's script that, too, was a deviation from Asquonset style.

Uneasy, Susanne held the envelope for a moment, thinking that

something had been going on with Natalie the last few times they talked. Her words had been optimistic ones, focusing on how Asquonset was recovering from Alexander's death, but she had seemed . . . troubled. More than once, Susanne sensed there was something Natalie wasn't saying, and since Susanne didn't want to be involved in vineyard business, she didn't prod. She simply decided that being troubled was part of the mourning process. Suddenly, now, she wondered if there was a connection between this envelope and that tension.

Opening the flap, she pulled a matching yellow card from inside.

PLEASE JOIN US
FOR A CELEBRATION OF OUR WEDDING
LABOR DAY SUNDAY AT 4 P.M.
THE GREAT HOUSE
ASQUONSET VINEYARD AND WINERY
NATALIE SEEBRING AND CARL BURKE

Susanne frowned. She read the words again.

Wedding?

Stunned, she read the invitation a third time, but the words didn't change. Natalie remarrying? It didn't make sense. Natalie marrying *Carl*? That made even *less* sense. Carl Burke had been the vineyard manager for thirty-five years. He was an employee, an earthy man of meager means, nowhere *near* on a par with Alexander Seebring—Susanne's father—Natalie's husband of fifty-eight years, dead barely six months.

Oh yes. Susanne knew that Carl had been a big help to Natalie in the last few months. Natalie mentioned him often—more often of late. But *talking* about the man was one thing; marrying him was something else entirely.

Was this a joke? Not likely. Even if Natalie were a comic, which she wasn't, she wouldn't do anything as tasteless as this.

Susanne turned the card over, looking for a word of explanation from her mother, but there was none.

Reading the words a fourth time, having no choice but to take them as real, she was deeply hurt. Mothers didn't *do* things like this, she told herself. They didn't break momentous news to their daugh-

ters in a formal invitation—not unless they were estranged, and Natalie and Susanne weren't. They talked on the phone once a week. They saw each other every month or so. Granted, they didn't confide in each other. That wasn't the nature of their relationship. But even in spite of that, it didn't make sense to Susanne that Natalie wouldn't have forewarned her about Carl—unless Natalie had forewarned her, in her own evasive way, through those frequent mentions of Carl.

Perhaps Susanne had missed that, but she certainly hadn't missed mention of a wedding. There hadn't been one. For all outward purposes, Natalie was still in mourning.

Susanne read the invitation a final time. Still stunned, still disbelieving, she picked up the phone.

IN THE FOYER of a small brick Colonial in Washington, D.C.'s, Woodley Park, a yellow envelope identical to the one his sister had received lay in the heap on the floor under the mail slot when Greg Seebring arrived home that same afternoon. He didn't see it at first. All he saw was the heap itself, which was far too big to represent a single day's mail. He had been gone for three. He guessed he was looking at mail from all three, but where was his wife?

"Jill?" he called. Loosening his tie, he went looking. She wasn't in the living room, kitchen, or den. He went up the stairs, but the two bedrooms there were empty, too. Confused, he stood at the top of the banister and tried to recall whether she had anything planned. If so, she hadn't told him. Not that they'd talked during his trip. He'd been on the go the whole time, leaving the hotel early and returning late, too talked out to pick up the phone. He had felt really good about catching an early plane home. He had thought she would be pleased.

Pleased, indeed. She wasn't even *here*.

He should have called.

But hell, she hadn't called him, either.

Feeling suddenly exhausted, he went down the stairs for his bag. As soon as he lifted it, though, he set it back down and, taking only his laptop, scooped up the mail. Again, it seemed like too much.

He wondered if Jill had gone to see her mother. She had been considering that for a while.

Dumping the lot on the kitchen counter, he hooked the laptop to the phone and booted it up. While he waited, he pushed junk mail one way and bills another. Most of what remained was identifiable by a return address. There was an envelope from the Committee to Elect Michael Bonner, a friend of his who was running for the U.S. Senate and surely wanted money. There was one from a college friend of Jill's, and another postmarked Akron, Ohio, where Jill's mother lived, perhaps mailed before Jill had decided to visit. There was one with a more familiar postmark and an even more familiar scent.

Lifting the yellow envelope, he pictured his mother. Strong. Gracious. Daffodil-bright, if aloof.

But the vineyard colors were ivory with burgundy. She always used them. Asquonset was her identity.

The envelope had the weight of an invitation. No surprise there; partying was Natalie's specialty. But then, Alexander Seebring had loved a big bash, and who could begrudge him? No gentleman farmer, this man. Many a day he had walked the vineyard in his jeans and denim shirt alongside his manager. If not that, he was traveling to spread the Asquonset name, and the hard work had paid off. After years of struggle, he had Asquonset turning a tidy profit. He had earned the right to party.

Natalie knew how to oblige. She was in her element directing caterers, florists, and musicians. There had always been two festivals at Asquonset each year—one to welcome spring, one to celebrate the harvest. The spring party had been skipped this year, coming as it would have so soon after Al's death. Apparently, though, Natalie was chafing at the bit. She hated wearing black—didn't have a single black dress in her wardrobe, had actually had to go out and buy one for the funeral.

So, barely six months later, she was returning to form. Greg wasn't sure he approved. It seemed wrong, what with her husband of so many years—his father—still fresh in his grave, and the future of Asquonset up in the air.

Natalie wanted Greg to run it. She hadn't said that in as many words, but he had given her his answer anyway: *No. No way. Out of the question.*

He wondered if she had found a buyer—wondered, suddenly, whether this party was to introduce whoever it was. But she would