

Colton P.I.

Second Unit

Books by Gina Cresse

Sinfandel

A Deadly Change of Course—Plan B

A Deadly Bargain—Plan C

A Deadly Change of Heart

A Deadly Change of Power

A Deadly Change of Luck

Colton P.I.

Second Unit

Gina Cresse

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Cover graphics and design by
Terese Knapp
and
Pam Drake

ISBN-13: 978-1477677247

ISBN-10: 1477677240

All the characters in this book are fictitious, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

*For Larry, Roselyn,
Rick, Sue,
Terese, Tim,
Jim, and Elisa*

Chapter One

At least a hundred members of the cast and crew milled about on the brand new, graffiti-free Southern California freeway, yet to be officially named but already earning its keep as a movie set for a stunt scene in the latest Hollywood blockbuster. Since the freeway was visible from the 405, looky-loos turned the typical Monday stop-and-go traffic into a stop-look-honk-text-Google-honk-curse-honk-some-more quagmire.

A psychedelic VW Microbus, rigged with squibs and other pyrotechnics, lay on its side in the middle of the pavement, the apparent victim of a rollover crash. Stuntmen dressed as Middle Eastern terrorists and covered in makeup so they'd appear badly

burned and injured from the accident sat on the ground around the bus, readying themselves to play dead. Two L.A. County fire trucks and an ambulance were parked on the shoulder, out of the camera's view. Stuntman Sam Colton, dressed as a California Highway Patrolman, straddled a CHP motorcycle and checked his watch. They were behind schedule, as usual. He eyed the pastries on the caterer's craft table and wondered if he'd have time for a snack, but just then Jacques, the director, emerged from an air-conditioned trailer and raised a bullhorn to his mouth. "Okay, people! The light is going to be perfect in two minutes! Places, everyone!"

The terrorists collapsed in dead-looking heaps on the ground around the bus. Sam started the motorcycle and gave Jacques a thumbs-up. The clapboard was snapped in front of the camera and Jacques yelled, "Action!"

Sam gunned the motorcycle and raced past the VW bus, skidding to a stop about a hundred yards beyond it, then turned around and sped directly toward it. Someone from the special effects team pressed a button on a control panel and the bus exploded into a massive ball of flames just as the motorcycle reached the ramp that was set up directly behind it. Morning commuters on the 405 gave up hope of getting to work and got out of their cars to watch.

Sam launched the motorcycle skyward and everyone on set held their breaths, including Sam. The time it took to sail over the burning van seemed like an eternity. Sam noticed a Budweiser truck stopped on the 405 and made a mental note to pick up a six-pack on his way home. The bike cleared the burning bus and landed smoothly on the other side. He was supposed to stop the bike, jump off and run toward the bus as part of the scene, but as soon as he leaned the motorcycle on its kickstand, the stand broke and the bike fell over. Sam tried to catch it before it hit the ground, but gravity won the battle. One of the dead terrorists began laughing uncontrollably. Sam looked at the director.

“Cut!” Jacques yelled through the bullhorn.

Sam pulled the helmet off his sweaty head. “Another take?”

Jacques stomped across two lanes. “By the time we get set up again, our light won’t be right anymore! Dammit!”

Sam gazed at the smoldering Volkswagen. “The VW’s not looking too hot, either. Anyone bring a spare?”

Everyone but Jacques laughed. Just then, Sam’s cell rang, provoking a glare from Jacques. “Hundred dollar fine, Colton! What if that’d happened while the camera was rolling?”

Sam shrugged and answered the phone. “Yeah?”

“Mr. Colton?” the woman asked.

“Speaking,” Sam replied.

“My daughter’s missing.” The woman was sobbing with desperation. Sam patted his pockets for a pen, but the costume department didn’t include one with the uniform. How was he ever supposed to write a ticket without a pen?

“What’s your name?” he asked.

“Ruth Carpenter. Can we meet?”

The name sounded familiar but Sam couldn’t quite put his finger on where he’d heard it. He gave Ruth directions to his house and a list of items to bring, then agreed to meet with her that evening.

“Thank you, Mr. Colton. You’re our only hope.” Then she hung up.

Sam slipped his phone in his pocket and mused, “Sam Colton, AKA, Obi-Wan Kenobi.”

After a full day of shooting, Sam couldn’t get Ruth’s voice out of his head. Some actresses spent years and fortunes on drama classes learning to emote the kind of desperation Ruth conveyed—and all she had to do was lose a daughter.

The studio guys gave Sam the go ahead to take the CHP motorcycle home so he could weld the kickstand back together. Tori, the production assistant, would bring his car by his house later that night, and he gave her money to pick up beer. Production assistants never refused an assignment, especially if they thought it might get them a more important job on the next picture. They’d finish filming the last few scenes the following day. He

rushed through some last-minute business with Jacques, then headed home without taking time to change out of the CHP uniform that the costume department had signed out to him. Normally, Wanda the costume Nazi wouldn't allow a uniform off the set, but she'd gotten herself locked in the wardrobe trailer with the doorknob busted and the locksmith hadn't shown up yet. He'd like to say he was responsible, but this time it was just pure good luck.

Sam tightened the helmet strap under his chin and pulled on the gloves. The 405 was still hideously backed up, but Sam managed to maneuver the motorcycle into the diamond lane, where there was not a vehicle in sight. Carpoolers were like Unicorns. Not wanting to be late for his appointment with the missing girl's mother, Sam twisted the throttle on the modified stunt motorcycle and grinned when the front wheel lifted off the pavement.

Sam's prospective clients were waiting by the gate when he pulled up to his house in Agua Dulce, a small community just outside the congestion and traffic of Los Angeles. Agua Dulce means sweet water, so named because the water is in fact sweet, due to the arsenic it contains—another good reason to drink beer, Sam thought.

The Carpenters drove an older model Toyota Camry that was dark blue, he guessed, under all the dust and bird poop. Since he was on the bike and

didn't have his remote gate opener with him, he punched his code into the keypad and waited for the gate to swing open, then waved for them to follow him in.

Stopping in front of the house, he cut the engine. The Camry pulled in behind him, its bald tires threatening to go flat right there in the driveway. He watched both doors open in his rear-view mirrors then rocked the bike back onto its center stand and swung his leg over the seat, getting off on the high side. The technical advisor overseeing the movie had pounded the fact in his head that real California Highway Patrol officers never dismount a bike on the left. That would put them closer to the traffic and in danger of being hit by oncoming cars.

The bike's engine ticked as it cooled. Sam pulled the gloves off and held his hand out to the woman. She looked familiar to him. So did her husband.

"Mrs. Carpenter?" he asked. She was a stout woman with more than her fair share of curly red hair, which surrounded a freckled face that looked like it hadn't smiled in a very long time. She wore Wrangler jeans and lace-up cowboy boots and carried a purse that looked like a saddlebag. Sam figured her for a horse person—one who could probably wrestle a steer to the ground in less than eight seconds.

She shook Sam's hand. "Call me Ruth. I didn't know... you're a highway patrolman?"

“Oh, no. Stuntman. Just didn’t have time to change.”

“Ah,” she said, still a little tentative. “This is my husband, Wayne.”

Wayne Carpenter, in contrast to his wife, was slim and pale, like he’d never gone outside. He reminded Sam of a string bean trying to grow in the shade. He didn’t look like the picture of health, and Sam certainly couldn’t see him bucking bales of hay or hoisting saddles. Shaking his hand was like holding a cold trout. “Good to meet you,” Wayne said.

“My brother says you’re the best, Mr. Colton,” Ruth said. “But I thought you were a professional private investigator.”

“Call me Sam.” Digging his keys out of his pocket, he said, “I can’t be a private investigator and a stuntman at the same time?”

“I didn’t mean... of course you can. I just expected someone who would put... who would spend as much time, you know, as possible... I guess what I mean—”

“You want someone working full time to get your daughter back. I understand. Don’t worry. We’re just about wrapped with this project, then my time is all yours—if you decide to hire me.”

Motioning for them to follow, Sam said, “Come on in. It’s hotter than hell out here.” He shoved the key in his front door lock. “Who’s your brother, by the way?”

"Rocky Schatner. You helped him with a stalker."

"Rocky's your brother?" Sam had never forgotten ol' Rock. He was one of his first clients, a small-time actor on a daytime soap who was voted the sexiest doctor on a daytime drama by every bored housewife in America. Rocky picked up a psychopathically jealous husband who couldn't differentiate real life from television, so after the guy busted through two iron gates and a restraining order, Rocky decided to hire Sam. The lunatic had threatened to tie Rocky to his bumper and drag him, naked, down Sunset Strip until all that was left was a bloody skeleton. Sam sent Rocky off to Tahiti while he holed up in his house and waited to see what transpired. To finally get the message through to the nutcase that he ought to leave Rocky alone, Sam had to pepper the fleshy part of his backside with rock salt from a 12-gauge shotgun.

Following Sam into his office, Wayne and Ruth sat down close to each other on the overstuffed sofa across from his desk.

"Rocky worships the ground you walk on," she said.

"He should. I think I probably saved his life." Sam smiled at the couple. "You two look familiar. Have we met? Maybe at Rocky's?"

They both frowned. "You probably saw us on the news. When Shelly disappeared, we—"

“You’re the Carpenter girl’s parents,” he said, when it finally struck him, like the time Tom Cruise knocked him out before he’d learned to pull his punches. These two faces had been plastered all over the news when their daughter vanished a little more than a month ago, but then a pop star, a basketball giant and a homecoming queen all got themselves into big trouble in the same week and the news about Shelly diminished until everyone forgot about her—including Sam.

Ruth removed a small green notebook from her oversized purse and gripped it tightly, her fingernails dug into the cardboard cover. “Yes.”

“Is that the information I asked you to bring?” Sam asked.

Up until then, Wayne hadn’t said much. He cleared his throat. “Yes, but before we talk about Shelly, we’d like to know a little more about your qualifications.”

Leaning back in his chair, Sam nodded. Time for the job interview. “Sure. Where would you like me to start?”

Putting an arm around Ruth’s shoulders, Wayne said, “Well, we’d like to know how long you’ve been a private investigator. Maybe a little of your background?”

It was a good question. What Ruth and Wayne needed more than a description of his employment history was reassurance of Sam’s skill and ability. “I got involved in investigations while I was working on *Magnum P.I.* back in the mid-eighties. I’d just

graduated from UCLA and even though I was quite a bit younger, I got the job as Tom Selleck's stunt double."

Looking hard at Sam, Ruth said, "You do look a little like him."

"I get that a lot," he said, flashing his most humble smile. "Anyhow, one of the technical advisers on the show was retired from the LAPD and had his own private investigation company. He was working on a tough case and needed some extra muscle and since I'm six four and fairly solid, I volunteered."

What Sam didn't tell them was that he'd just recovered from a broken leg when a car-chase scene went wrong and he spent four months on crutches. Tony knew he was having a tough time, so he offered Sam a chance to help him out in his business—sort of an apprenticeship. Sam kept telling him no, but Tony came up to him one day with his cheeks stuffed full of cotton and said, "Kid, I'm gonna make you an offer you can't refuse." It was the worst Brando impression Sam had ever heard, but it worked.

"So you went to work for him?" Wayne asked.

Sam nodded. "I worked for Tony for seven years. By that time, I'd learned enough to get my own P.I. ticket."

"But what about the stunt work?" Ruth asked.

"I still work for the studios, but I don't risk my neck anymore, if that's possible in this business. I do

some stunt work, but mostly I do second unit directing, so my schedule lets me work when I want to.”

“What does that mean—second unit?” Ruth asked.

“You go to the movies much?”

“Once in a while,” she said, giving Wayne a quick glance.

“If you sit through the ending credits, you’ll see a heading called Second Unit. That’s where everyone who had anything to do with the action sequences in the film is listed... and scenes that don’t involve the main actors, like establishing shots, and pictures of peoples’ feet.”

They both nodded, then Ruth said, “I see.”

But Sam could tell she wasn’t interested in his movie career. She didn’t care about the fact that half his life was spent creating planned chaos. That he’d rolled cars rigged to explode. Or that this morning, he’d jumped a motorcycle over a burning VW.

Wayne was interested, though. “Isn’t it dangerous?”

“Not as much as you’d think. There’s a lot of planning and setup involved. I have degrees in engineering and physics, so it’s not like I’m shooting from the hip.”

They both looked surprised and Sam could see the question rising in Ruth’s face—the same question his mother asked the day he turned down a job offer from Lockheed so he could work with Bellisario.

"I do it because the money's better—and it's more fun than playing with a computer all day."

"But it's risky. That doesn't bother you?" Ruth said.

Finally, they were getting down to what she really wanted to know—did Sam have enough guts to do whatever was required to get her daughter back. "Risk is part of the job—of both jobs. I don't worry too much about getting hurt." Sam let out a little laugh. "Except when my mom calls me the night before a big stunt and tells me she has a *bad feeling*. I hate it when she does that."

Ruth looked at her husband. "I think we should hire him."

Good. The pre-date interview was out of the way and they could get down to business. "Are we ready to talk about Shelly?" Sam said.

Wayne nodded and Ruth cleared her throat. "It's been five weeks. The police don't have a clue," Ruth said as she handed Sam her notebook. Her eyes were bloodshot and puffy, and he caught a glimpse of a tear welling up.

Sam pulled a box of tissue out of a drawer and reached across his desk to offer her one. She forced a smile and took the entire box. He was okay with that. There was a whole case out in the garage. By the time people reached the point where they sought his services, they were usually pretty emotional.

Flipping through the pages of the notebook she gave him, Sam was surprised at its brevity—short

lists of names, addresses, a few personal notes. The job wasn't going to be easy. For the moment, he set the notebook aside. "I don't remember all the specifics of the case. Can you fill me in?" He grabbed a pencil and his own tablet of paper.

Ruth composed herself. "Shelly was...is a student at UCLA."

"Is Shelly short for anything?" Sam asked.

"Michelle, but everyone calls her Shelly. She's studying law. She was supposed to come home for the July Fourth weekend, but she never showed up," Ruth said.

"She live in the dorms?"

"No. She has an apartment off campus."

"Roommates?"

"No. Shelly is...." She had to search for the right words. "She's more mature than most girls her age. She doesn't have patience for her peers' juvenile shenanigans."

Juvenile shenanigans. Sam pictured toga parties and rowdy kids with loud music and kegs of beer. He thought every kid out from under the watchful eye of Mom and Dad loved that sort of thing.

"What kind of apartment?"

"Oh, it's nice. Two bedrooms, fireplace, all new appliances. She even has a garage for her car."

Sam wondered how Shelly managed expenses on her own. The Carpenters didn't appear to be solvent, much less wealthy. "Did she work?"

"No. You're wondering how she paid the rent."

"To be honest, yes."

Ruth sat up straight and crossed her big arms over her chest. “Shelly carries a 4.0 grade point average. She’s put herself through school with scholarships and grants. We’re very proud of her,” she said, her face a slightly deeper shade of red than before.

“I bet you are. How about boyfriends?”

They both shook their heads adamantly. “No boyfriends,” Ruth said. “She’s totally focused on her education right now.”

Rocking back in his chair, Sam asked, “You brought a picture of her?”

“Yes,” Ruth said, grabbing her saddlebag/purse and producing a framed 5 by 7. Sam leaned forward and took it from her.

“She’s very pretty,” he said, staring at the photo. He wasn’t lying. This girl would be hounded by every male on campus with a detectable testosterone level. If Sam was twenty years younger, he’d probably go for her himself. Hell, forget the twenty years—this girl was gorgeous. She had wavy blonde hair and unbelievably blue eyes and a perfect smile. She was the kind of girl you’d see on the cover of one of those magazines women love to buy, hoping to capture the same dazzling beauty by osmosis. Sam looked up from the picture at Ruth and Wayne Carpenter and wondered if maybe Shelly was adopted.

They answered all his questions about Shelly, but never once asked about his fee. Sam finally had to break it to them. "So, you still want to hire me?"

"Yes. We're not intimidated by the cost, Mr. Colton," Ruth said.

"Sam," he reminded her.

"Sam. We'd pay anything to get her back," she said.

She wrote him a check for the retainer. Who was she kidding? Sam figured Uncle Rocky would be footing the bill. Ruth and Wayne Carpenter couldn't even afford to put decent tires on their old car.

Sam walked them outside and waved as they pulled out of the driveway. His phone rang and he ran back in the house. According to the caller ID display, it was someone from the studio.

"Yeah," he said.

"What the hell did you do?"

"Merle? That you?" he asked, laughing. Merle was the producer for the film Sam was working on.

"Damn right it's Merle. I got the head of the Highway Patrol down here ready to haul my ass off to jail because some clown decided to get cute and ride wheelies down the 405 today—wearing a uniform and riding a CHP bike. You know anything about it?"

"Someone turned me in?"

"Thirty-five someones turned you in, you overgrown adolescent pain in the ass. From now on, that bike and the uniform stay on the lot. You sign them in and out like a damn library book! Got it?"

Wandering into the kitchen, Sam pulled his last longneck bottle of beer out of the fridge. "I got it, Merle. Guess it's a good thing I didn't stop to buy beer on my way home like I'd planned. Want me to bring it back tonight?"

"You stay the hell away from it. I'm sending someone from the studio over right now to pick it up. And the uniform, too."

"Okay, Merle." Raising his arm over his head, Sam did an armpit test. "You might need to have it cleaned. It was a scorcher today."

"Just have it ready to go. You know what a pain in the ass you are? If you weren't so damn good at what you do, I'd fire your sorry hide." The line went click and Sam stared at the dial-tone-humming phone in his hand. He'd really done it this time. Merle hadn't hung up on him since... come to think of it, Merle had never hung up on Sam before.

He turned on the TV and switched it to ESPN. As he hunkered down in his leather recliner with a beer and his remote, he felt a little guilty. He and Merle went way back. Sam was the best man at Merle's last two weddings, but Sam got him in trouble, so he decided to cool it with the childish stunts. Besides, it was time to get serious about his next job. There'd be opportunities for practical jokes later, after he found Shelly Carpenter—alive, he hoped—but after five weeks, the odds were not very good.