

Murder, Mayhem, and Merlot

By Gina Cresse

Chapter 1

Burly winery worker Angus McAllister screamed like a little girl when the purple-stained body tumbled out of the grape truck bin into the crusher's big hopper. "Shut it off!" someone yelled, while others tried to reach the body with rakes before the big stainless-steel auger grabbed it and churned it into a bloody mess.

I covered my eyes with one hand and my mouth with the other. I did not want to see what a human body looked like after going through the grape-crushing process, but if somehow I caught a glimpse, I wasn't sure my breakfast would voluntarily stay put. Just then, the deafening sound of the machinery halted and all I could hear were men's voices shouting, "Get him out of there!"

I parted the fingers over my eyes and chanced to witness the rescue attempt, if you could call it that. It was more of a recovery effort. The man was clearly dead. His skin was the color of violet petals. His once blue suit was now deep purple, and the tie wrapped around his head appeared to have been red-and-white striped when it left the factory but now was solid plum colored.

"Oh my God!" Angus cried, grabbing a rake and snagging a belt-loop. I climbed down off the platform to give the men room to lay the body down once they'd fished it out of the grapes.

"Who is he?" someone asked. No one volunteered an answer.

I took out my cell phone and speed-dialed Detective Obermeyer. He picked up on the first ring. "Kate? What's up?"

"I think you better get over to Venezia Winery," I said into the phone as I watched the faces around me grimace at the sight of the purple man.

"Because?"

Angus found the dead man's wallet and flipped it open, gazing at the driver's license. "It's Tom Shermantine," he announced.

My mind blanked out for a moment, stunned at the news.

"Kate? You there?" Obermeyer said.

"Yes, sorry," I said. "It's Congressman Shermantine. He's dead."

"Dead? How?"

"I don't know, but he was at the bottom of a bin full of Merlot grapes they were getting ready to crush."

"I'm on my way."

#

I'd met Detective Steve Obermeyer during last year's harvest when he accused me of growing marijuana under a bridge adjacent to my vineyard. Back then he was a narcotics detective, but when a young winemaker's body was found in a cave on my property, he made the transition to homicide and has remained there ever since. I was cleared, of course, from having any involvement in either crime, though it was touch-and-go there for a while. We have maintained a friendship, of sorts, where he consults me on computer-related matters, and I ask him for consultation fees that he never pays me, but promises that he'll return the favors whenever I want him to. Honestly, I hope to never need the professional favors of a homicide detective, so I'm pretty sure I'm getting the short end.

While I waited for Obermeyer, I called my vineyard manager, Andy Carmichael, to give him the bad news. He was the new owner of the vineyard next to mine, which he'd purchased after the previous owner, Dash Zucker, was killed.

"*Congressman* Tom Shermantine?" Andy said, sounding incredulous.

"Yes."

After a brief moment of silence, he said, "When's the party?"

"Andy! The man's dead," I said.

"You and I both know every farmer within a hundred miles will be celebrating as soon as the news gets out."

"Well, don't be planning yours just yet."

"I don't like the sound of that," he said. "What are you not telling me?"

I gazed at the chaos around me. Grape trucks were lined up out to the highway and impatient truckers started wandering toward the crushing station to find out what the hold-up was. Winery managers tried to keep people back until the police arrived, but the curious crowd outnumbered them ten-to-one.

"I think you better come down here," I finally said into the phone. "They're going to want to talk to you."

"Just because I didn't like Shermantine? No one in this valley liked him."

"They'll want to talk to me, too." I rubbed my forehead with the palm of my hand. I felt a headache coming on. "It was your... our grapes his body was buried under."

"What?!"

"The Merlot from the Zucker lease."

"You've gotta be kidding."

Just as he said it, Obermeyer's car pulled to the front of the grape truck line, with a string of county vehicles behind him.

"The police are here. I better go."

#

By the time Andy arrived, yellow crime-scene tape had been stretched around the crushing station and the coroner had examined the body. When Detective Obermeyer spotted Andy walking across the plant, he waved him over and summoned me with his other hand.

"Okay, fill me in on what she's not telling me," he said to Andy.

Andy and I exchanged glances. "I told him I wanted to wait for you until I said anything."

"Like I'm your lawyer or something?"

"No, like you're my partner. Remember?"

Andy let out a deep sigh. "Those grapes the congressman was buried under—they're mine."

"Ours," I corrected.

"Technically they're mine, but Kate and I have a verbal-agreement partnership that she likes to cancel every other day." Andy shot me a harsh look. "Last night her last words to me were something to the effect of 'take a hike' as I recall."

I rolled my eyes. "Fine. They're *your* grapes. So why was I the one who got up at four this morning to meet the damn truck here so I could check the MOG?"

"Because I had to—"

"Oh, and the MOG in *your* grapes turned out to be totally unacceptable."

Obermeyer held up a "time-out" T with his hands. "What's MOG?"

"Material other than grape," Andy and I said in unison.

"I guess a corpse falls into that category." Obermeyer clicked his pen a couple times. "I thought you said those were Merlot grapes."

"They are," I said.

"I thought your vineyard was Zinfandel."

"It is."

"And the Zucker vineyard?"

"Zin and Chardonnay," I said.

"So where'd the Merlot come from?"

Andy crossed his arms over his chest and cleared his throat. "When I bought the Zucker place, I had to agree to keep up the remainder of a ten-year lease the original owner had with his cousin. He's got fifty acres of Merlot. I keep the place up and deposit a portion of the proceeds into his account when I sell the grapes."

Obermeyer wrote in his notepad. "Why doesn't the cousin sell the grapes himself?"

"He's doing seven to ten in Folsom for drug dealing."

Obermeyer looked at me over his sunglasses. "So Zucker was dealing, his daughter was dealing, and his cousin, too?"

I nodded. "Family business."

"What's this cousin's name?"

"Lawrence Hertz," Andy said. "There's talk he might be part of the mandatory release, in which case I'm out of the lease agreement. This is one deal I didn't want any part of, but Zucker's widow wouldn't sell unless I agreed."

"And how exactly do you fit into this lease agreement?" Obermeyer asked me.

"I'm the unofficial partner in the Zucker vineyard." I looked at Andy and said, "We really need to drop the Zucker name."

"I agree," he said. "You come up with a new name."

"Oh no, I'm not burning any brain-cells on a property that I have no legal stake in."

"There you go again. I offered to put your name on the title, but you wouldn't have it—"

Obermeyer cut in. "Can we get back to the problem at hand, people?"

"Sorry," we both grumbled.

"Where is this vineyard?"

"North of Liberty Road, east of Clay Station. I'll draw you a map," Andy said, taking a notepad and pen from his pocket.

"How does a body end up in a grape truck bin and nobody notices it?" Obermeyer asked.

Since Andy was busy drawing his map, I volunteered to answer. "They were harvested last night. It was dark."

"How do you pick grapes in the dark?"

"Machine picked. It's cheaper and you can harvest over-night when the grapes are cool."

"You can pick grapes with a machine?" he asked.

"Yeah, if they're on wire," I said. "The harvester straddles the trellis and mechanical rods spin around, shaking the grapes off the vine. They fall into a catching tray, then a conveyor picks them up and sends them over to a trailer in the next row."

Obermeyer nodded and made more notes.

"How did he die?" I asked.

"Single gunshot wound to the back of the head."

"Execution?" I asked.

"No. Long range shot. Looks like a professional sniper."

I gazed at the grape-stained body as it was being put into a zip-up bag. "How'd his body get into the truck?"

"Good question," Obermeyer said. "We found significant amounts of blood on the floor of the bin, and blood splatter on the sides, so it appears he was standing in, or on the edge of the bin when he was shot, then fell face-first into it."

Andy handed Obermeyer his map.

"What was a Congressman doing crawling around on a grape truck in a suit and tie?" I asked, not expecting an answer.

Obermeyer studied the hand-drawn map. "Any homes out there? Possible witnesses?"

Andy shook his head. "Just a bunch of cows and a few horses."

"I talked to the driver," Obermeyer said. "The trailers had been dropped off at the vineyard a couple days ago, and by the time he arrived with his truck, he just hitched it up and drove it here."

"How about the guy driving the harvester?" I asked Andy. "Maybe he saw something. Who'd you use?"

"Jerry Arnack. I've got one of his cards here somewhere," he said, fishing through his wallet. He pulled out a business card and handed it to Obermeyer. "He's probably asleep by now. He works nights during harvest."

Obermeyer wrote down the information from the card and handed it back to Andy. "I get the feeling people didn't like Shermantine."

"He didn't make many friends in the ag business," Andy said. "You knew about the measure he tried to get through?"

"No. Fill me in."

"For two years in a row, he tried to pass a measure that would put meters on private wells so the government could collect ground water fees."

Obermeyer stopped writing. "Really?"

"Yeah. I pay for the hole, the pipe, the pump, the tank, the electricity, the filtering, the testing, and the maintenance on my own well, and he wants to send me a bill for my water." Just talking about it got Andy riled.

"Needless to say, all the farmers in the valley were opposed to it," I added. "You'll have a pretty big suspect list if you think that's the motive."

"But it didn't pass, right?" Obermeyer said.

"No, but that didn't stop him from putting it on the ballot every election," Andy said. "He was in the pocket of some developer trying to get his hands on agricultural land. He already took a couple hundred acres and re-zoned it commercial and residential, thanks to Shermantine's meddling."

"Who's the developer?" Obermeyer asked.

"It's a corporation called O.S.I., Inc. I don't know who the president is," Andy said. "But the groundwater fees would be used to build pipelines to provide water to the property being developed."

I could almost see the wheels turning in Obermeyer's head. "Shooting in the middle of nowhere. Only witnesses are livestock. Hundreds, maybe even thousands who hate the guy, and they probably all own rifles."

"You'll solve it," I said. "I have confidence."

Obermeyer shrugged and walked away.

I looked over at Andy. "You have any suspects in mind?"

He nodded. "Everyone I know."

"Except me."

"Except you. Want to get a pizza tonight? I'm buying."

"Will it be a party?" I asked.

"Not if you don't want it to be."

I thought about it for a minute, then nodded. "Sure. I didn't like the guy either."