

Sinfandel

Gina Cresse

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All the characters in this book are fictitious,
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*For Larry, Roselyn, Rick, Sue,
Terese, Tim, Jim, and Elisa*

Chapter One

The August breeze barely moved the curtains away from the open windows in my freshly painted bedroom. I'd kicked the bedspread off hours earlier and only the light cotton sheets covered my legs. As I lay on my back, my mind foggy, I tried to identify the sound that had jarred me out of a restless sleep. Was it a dream or was it those thieving raccoons stealing cat food again? A twenty-pound bag had disappeared in a little more than a week, and I knew my three barn cats weren't the culprits. I rolled my head on the pillow, glancing at the clock on the nightstand.

Two thirty.

I moaned. I would be on a cruise ship in Panama, sleeping like a bear in December, if I hadn't landed a great consulting job just last week. Thank God I'd bought the trip insurance. I had an eight o'clock

appointment with my new employer in Sacramento, which was an hour away from my home in Clements, a small town surrounded by farms, orchards, and vineyards. In three hours I'd have to get up and it could take that long to fall back to sleep. Looking at the ceiling, I felt a nagging awareness that something was wrong. I watched the blades of the ceiling fan turn slowly. It was a pretty fan—brand new, white with brushed nickel accents and tulip-shaped frosted glass shades.

But I shouldn't be able to see those details at this hour. Maybe the moon was full. Maybe the raccoons had brought a flashlight.

Turning over, I propped myself up on one elbow to see out the window.

Headlights.

Throwing the sheets off, I double-checked the clock. Who would be parked in my driveway at this hour? In only a T-shirt and underpants, I fumbled in the semi-darkness for a robe. The vehicle idling outside my house was aimed toward the road as if it had just come from my barn. It was a white pickup and in the moonlight it gleamed. The silhouette of a man in the driver's seat, backlit by my barnyard light, gave me a chill.

Who is that creep?

He just sat there, staring at my house. The vineyard manager had brought in a crew to prune the vines last year. They'd show up at this hour, but this was not the right time of year for pruning. I'd made an appointment with a new vineyard manager since the old one had just moved to Napa to make the big bucks, but that was an

afternoon appointment, so either he was very early, or I had a stalker on my hands.

I padded down the short hallway to the back door, double-checking the lock and the deadbolt. With all the lights off inside the house, he couldn't see me. I returned to my bedside phone and dialed 911. The dispatcher answered immediately. "What's your emergency?"

With my heart racing, my words came with some difficulty. "There's someone outside my house... watching me."

"Is he there now?"

"Yes."

"Are you alone?"

"Yes!" The pickup rolled slowly down the driveway, turned around and drove back up behind the barn. "Please send the police."

"I've dispatched a deputy. He'll be there in a few minutes. Just stay on the phone with me, okay?"

"Okay."

"What's your name?" the dispatcher asked.

"Kate Cimaglia." I moved from room to room, window to window, trying to keep the pickup in sight. "He's gone behind my barn."

"What's back there?" she asked.

"Nothing... a gate. God, I hope he doesn't let the horses out."

The dispatcher must have sensed my worry. "Just stay in the house."

Five minutes later, the truck rolled down the driveway to the open ranch gate, paused for a moment then peeled out onto the road, throwing gravel, tires

squealing on the pavement until it disappeared behind the vineyards that surround my house on three sides. Two minutes after that, a police cruiser pulled into my driveway and a lone deputy climbed out of the car and knocked on my front door.

"I'm Deputy Stanford. You called about a prowler?" Stanford was young, maybe twenty-five, and probably new on the job, since he'd been stuck working the graveyard shift. Skinny and smooth-skinned, he looked like someone I could probably beat in an arm-wrestling match.

I walked the perimeter of the house with Stanford as we surveyed the property with his flashlight. "He went up behind the barn for a long time," I told him. Following the flashlight beam, we trekked up to the barn and checked the area behind it. The gate was closed and the chain still fastened.

The warm air smelled of grapes and livestock and dust raised by the horses in the lower field, dry from lack of rain. Across the road, a lone cow bellowed in the darkness, probably hoping all the activity meant an early breakfast. Normally the night would be alive with coyote serenades, screech owls and lovesick frogs, but tonight was oddly quiet. Even the raccoons had made themselves scarce.

"Anything out of place?" Stanford asked, shining his light on the ground along the fence line.

I peered into the compartments of my horse trailer, then made sure my pickup was untouched. "No. At least not that I can see until the sun comes up."

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We walked back to his car and I explained the details of the strange visit. Stanford made notes in a black notebook. Even though the night air was warm, I felt cold and wrapped my robe tighter around my shoulders.

Stanford scratched his chin and glanced at something below the hem of my short satin robe. My legs? It's always a surprise when men ogle me. I'm not cute, not blonde or busty, but tall and lanky with a mass of dark, curly hair. My mother says I'm beautiful, but her opinion may be somewhat biased. I don't feel beautiful—at least I haven't for a long time.

"Angry ex-husband, maybe? Trying to yank your chain?" Stanford leaned back against his car.

"I've never been married."

He gaped at me for a few seconds. I guess my marital status stumped him. "Ex-boyfriend, then? Anyone who might have an axe to grind?"

I suppressed a laugh at the suggestion. I hadn't even been on a date in three years. I shook my head. "No one who'd stoop to this." Now I was shivering. "You know what I think? I've heard rumors about the people next door." I pointed across the west vineyard.

Stanford's gaze followed. "Neighbors?"

Out in the country, the nearest neighbor could be a mile away. In my case, they were just over the first rise, within shooting distance, as I'd learned last year when I'd first bought my little house—which came with two open hand-dug wells, a cave, a seasonal creek, three junk cars and an old dilapidated boat, along with a dozen truckloads of miscellaneous rubbish, and the best part, twenty-five acres of young Zinfandel grape vines.

I had been washing my car in the shade of a mulberry tree when the sound of gunfire pierced the air and bullets whizzed through the branches over my head. The place had been vacant for two years before I bought it, and the neighbors didn't think to check before they used it as a backstop for target practice. A good dose of screaming in the general direction of the shots put an end to the episode, but since then I'd decided the carwash in town was safer.

"The other side of that vineyard, over the hill. I see cars go in and out at all hours of the night. I bet this guy tonight was at the wrong house." I wasn't sure who I was trying to convince more, Stanford or me. "That's got to be it."

"You think they're dealing in drugs?"

"That's the rumor I've heard, but I have no proof."

Stanford thought about it, nodded and closed his notebook. "I'll check with the narcotics division. To be safe, you should keep your gate closed from now on. Maybe even get a chain and lock it."

I agreed and Stanford promised to drive by the house a few times over the next couple of nights. By the time he left, it was four in the morning. I tried to go back to sleep, but it was pointless. At eight, I called to re-schedule my client meeting; then, after making sure the gate was closed, I headed for town.

I walked into the Big Five Sporting Goods store and took it all in. The place was filled with everything from chic designer clothing to football shoulder pads. Bicycles hung from the ceiling and basketball hoops sprang up

out of the floor. Glancing around the huge open space, my eyes finally landed on what I was there for, neatly organized on the back wall.

The guy behind the counter looked like he'd trained with the Navy Seals. The seams on the sleeves of his black T-shirt threatened to split under the strain of his tree-trunk sized biceps. "What can I do for you?" he asked as I gazed at the wall of guns behind him.

"I need a shotgun," I said. "Something small enough that I can lift it but big enough to make an impression."

He grinned and looked me over. "You could handle a twenty-gauge without much trouble. Any particular reason you need a shotgun?"

Studying the collection of firearms on the wall, I answered, "I had a sudden urge to exercise my Second Amendment rights."

"Terrific," he said. "Let me show you this Mossberg."

After comparing it to several others, I chose the Mossberg, filled out the necessary paperwork and started the clock on my ten-day waiting period.