

Chapter 1

I AWOKE WITH a start. Somebody was banging on my front door, really hammering on it and had been for some time. From the pounding, I suspected the only way I was ever getting back to sleep was if I got up and answered it, so I did. I threw off the covers and navigated my way through the apartment with eyes mostly shut and mind still in a fog. I also suspected it was still early, much too early from the light or rather lack of light that was streaming in from the windows to be woken up in such a manner.

At the front door through the glass I saw the culprit; it was Marjorie, my landlady. I could also see she could see me now too, because she had stopped her pounding and was smiling and waving at me through the glass. I was annoyed, but not

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at Marjorie, she was all right and looked to be in some sort of trouble, it was the thought that was trying to break through the fog in my brain, a vague impression I was standing there only in my underwear, though I was still too groggy to stop myself from swinging the door wide.

“Oh, Chris. Thank God I caught you before you left for work. You have to come right away!”

Marjorie was looking at me with a mixture of anxiety and embarrassment.

“Wha—” My tongue wasn’t connected up properly yet. “What time is it?”

“Ten to six,” she said. “I’m so sorry for waking you so early, but you have to come. You have to come right away, I can’t stand it!”

“Wha—” I repeated. Yeah, I was a real brain surgeon this morning, but if she was right about the time being ten to six, I had only been asleep for two hours – yesterday had been a long day and night at the winery – and I needed a full eight and a half hours or the rest of the day I’m just damaged goods.

She laughed suddenly, still embarrassed at me standing there and turned me around by the shoulder. “Go get some pants on and come to the house. I’ll pour you some coffee. But, hurry!”

I lived in the granny flat behind Marjorie’s house so I didn’t have far to go, just along the pea-gravel path through her extensive garden past the persimmon and pear trees to her back porch. I had pants and a shirt on now, and had decided what the heck and put on shoes and socks as well.

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The pea-gravel tended to be sharp and I have sensitive feet. She was there waiting for me with the door wide, thrusting a mug of steaming coffee into my hands. Her anxiety was overcoming her embarrassment or maybe she was just relieved I had come fully dressed.

“What’s the trouble?”

“Thank God you’re here, Chris. I just didn’t know what to do, and I was so worried you had already left for work.”

“Yeah, you said that before.” My brain was coming alive as I sipped at the coffee. “What’s the problem?”

“I need you to catch a lizard.”

“A lizard?” I tried to keep the incredulity out of my voice.

“Yes, I was washing up in the kitchen this morning and it scared me half to death! There by the sink.” She was still keeping her distance.

“I don’t see it.” I was looking all around.

“No, you don’t understand. I’ve already caught it. It’s there, under the bar stools, beneath the plastic bowl.”

I saw the plastic container overturned on the floor. It was sort of see-through, and I could just make out something long and slender captured underneath it.

“Could you catch it and put it outside?” Marjorie asked quaking with revulsion. “The thought of touching it just gives me the shivers.”

It was my turn to laugh. “Okay, hold my coffee.” She did, and I got down on the floor and shouldered aside the bar-stools and got into position. It was a matter of getting my hand under the container without letting the lizard loose. That,

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I was convinced, would surely damage our landlady-tenant relationship. I got a grip on the plastic bowl and slowly lifted it just enough to slide my hand under, and like lightning I pounced and had it in my hand.

Marjorie whooped, “You did it!” and was clapping and rejoicing as I drew it forth and peeked at the lizard now in the palm of my hand.

It was a pencil.



I was still groggy and knew I would most likely be out of sorts the rest of the day as I drove to work. I had taken a long shower and had had four cups of coffee, and was on my fifth even now as I tooted along in my pickup down Highway 29, but it still hadn't done any good. I had the windows down, both of them, and the wind coming in was whipping my hair something fierce and had a bitter snap to it that was keeping me awake, but all I wanted was another six and a half hours hugging my pillow. As I turned into the winery through the fieldstone gateposts with the gilded letters MC for Maverick Cellars on each, I got a shock that brought me abruptly to full wakefulness. There in the employee parking lot was Vic's SUV. The man never slept. He had said he was headed home last night right after me and wouldn't be in again until noon, and here he was still at work, but that wasn't what had given me the jolt. It was the number of Napa Valley Sheriff's cars along with the Coroner's van parked here and there taking up most of the lot.

I pulled in next to Vic's vehicle, and cut the engine and

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got out. At the entrance to the winery was a deputy in uniform watching me approach.

“Who’re you?” he demanded as I continued forward.

“The assistant winemaker. What’s going on?”

He ignored the question and thumbed me inside. Then said in a flat voice, “Somebody will wanna talk to you, so stick around.”

I headed inside and almost immediately met another deputy who demanded in a similar flat voice, “What’re you doing?”

“I’m Chris Garrett. I work here.”

“Well, don’t go anywhere.”

“Yeah, I’ll stick around.”

“You do that.” And he thumbed me farther inside.

I could see a crowd of officials spread out along the narrow concrete aisle between the fermentation vats. The vats on this side of the winery were evenly spaced on each side, sixteen in all, and reaching ten feet or so in height. They were all made of seasoned Limosin oak built in France, disassembled and then reassembled at Maverick Cellars, and each capable of holding more than five thousand gallons of fermenting must. The crowd was mostly interested in the second to last vat on the left. I headed in that direction.

“You work here?” It was another deputy, only this one I knew. It was my friend Jeff Beckwell.

“I know, I know. Don’t go anywhere.”

As I drew closer Jeff grabbed my arm and held me back. “You’ll wanna stay back.”

“What the heck’s going on?”

Above us on the catwalk Sheriff Paul Coulette’s voice sounded hoarse in the wet morning air. “Okay, boys. Fish him out.”

His deputies grabbed hold of Victor Miranda who was floating face down in the vat of fermenting grapes. It took three of them to hoist his body clear of the thick soup of crushed fruit and position him onto a medical gurney. Red juice dripped from his stained clothing and poured from his pockets. More juice dripped in torrents down the sides of the vat and ran across the concrete tiles below. As I watched, I knew that awful sight of Victor would stay with me a long time – his tongue swollen up, his facial muscles stiff and contorted from rigor mortis, his skin and staring eyes blackened by the grape tannins.

“That Garrett?” It was the Sheriff’s hoarse voice from above.

Jeff nodded. “Yeah.”

“Hang on to him,” he said. “We’ll wanna talk.”