

Chapter One

Sonoma Valley, California
Friday, February 12, 2010
10:05 a.m.

Violent Crimes Investigations detective Daniel Reed eased to the side of the road, stopping behind the Sheriff's Department cruiser. He swung out of his four wheel drive Tahoe, a small, rust-colored cloud forming as his boots landed on the dirt road. Before him, vineyards stretched across the gently rolling hills, the mustard in bloom, painting the rows yellow. The cheery yellow contrasted sharply with the dormant vines, standing like gnarled headstones in a cemetery that extended as far as the eye could see.

The native American Miwoks had named this place Valley of the Moon. Their legend held that the moon had risen from the valley. Reed figured that's why so much crazy shit went down here. You had your bizarro religions, whacked-out criminals and a little dark cloud of weirdness that seemed to hang over the valley.

Blame the moon. It worked for him.

Today, however, his job was to figure out who'd buried what in this torn up vineyard.

The CSI unit pulled up behind him. The Sheriff's Department employed its own crime scene investigators, all sworn officers. The CSI guys--and gals--worked in tandem with the VCI, forming a two lead partnership for each case. Jointly, they were held responsible for the case. They wore the King's rings, so to speak.

Tanner had drawn this one, Reed saw as the attractive blond stepped out of her vehicle. Barbara Tanner looked a decade younger than her fifty years and had a reputation for being driven. A reputation he, unlike a few of his fellow detectives, admired.

Of course, his reputation for being a cowboy wasn't always appreciated either. They made a good team.

He slammed the SUV door and sauntered her way. "Flying solo today, Tanner?" he called, grinning.

"Hell no, Reed. I've got you."

"Born lucky and beautiful."

"Tell that to my shrink, plastic surgeon and prick of an ex-husband."

He laughed. "Know anything about this one?"

"Not much. Somebody found bones."

"My bet's on a dog."

"Coyote, maybe."

They reached the inner perimeter. He greeted the patrolman standing watch with a clipboard. He signed the log and handed it to Tanner. "What's the deal?"

“Phylloxera infestation. The whole vineyard had to be ripped out.”

Tanner made a sound of distress. “Breaks my heart to see old vines like these go.”

“Tell me about it,” the deputy agreed. “You feel it in the gut, you know?”

Reed glanced at the piles of thick, gnarled stocks and branches. Century old vines. The older the vine, the less fruit produced, but the more intense the flavor of that fruit. Nothing tasted quite like the wine produced from them.

“I’m a beer man myself,” he said.

The other two looked at him. Tanner shook her head. “You’re a weird one, Reed. You know that?”

She said it with a smile, but it was true. Here, in this little slice of the world, it was all about the grapes, the wine produced from them. The wine’s color. Its nose. The points awarded it by Wine Enthusiast. Here, invariably, idle conversation turned not to religion or politics, but to viticulture or terroir.

He’d turned his back on all that years ago.

He grinned at her. “Yeah, I know. But I wear the label well.”

“That you do.” She turned her attention back to the deputy. “The remains were found in the clearing process?”

He nodded and motioned a group of field workers sitting in the bed of a battered pick-up truck. “The front loader unearthed a wooden crate, or what was left of one. Guys there figured they’d found buried treasure, got pretty excited. That changed when they got a look inside.”

“You confirmed?”

“Didn’t want to mess with the box. Took a peek, confirmed some sort of remains.”

“Human?” Tanner asked.

“Not my area. It’s freaky, though.”

Tanner cocked a perfectly arched eyebrow, clearly amused. “Would that be your professional opinion, Officer?”

He laughed. “As a matter of fact it would.”

Reed and Tanner ducked under the crime scene tape and picked their way to the discovery. The old vines had gone deep; ripping them up had created a mess.

Reed fitted on Latex gloves and squatted beside the find. The box was badly decomposed. In the field workers’ eagerness to pry off the top, it had partially crumbled.

“Wine crate,” he said. “Or what’s left of one. Rules out a coyote.”

“Been buried awhile.”

“Lid was nailed shut.” He indicated the rusty nail that had fallen away from the crumbled wood. “Somebody gave a shit about fido. Got a pen?”

She handed him one; he used it to lift away a corner of the heavy plastic sheeting. Reed prepared himself for a wave of odor that surprisingly didn’t come.

Tanner got the first look and swore. “Holy Christ. Freaky doesn’t quite cover it.”

Not a dog or coyote, Reed saw. And not just bones. An infant, mummified.

He gazed at the remains, a sinking feeling in the pit of his gut. This picture perfect wine country day had just turned ugly.