



COLD
WATER
CREEK

*The one thing about killers?
They look like you and me.*

STEVEN LABREE

When the light cleared, I saw the paramedics push Jack away. They knelt next to me, rattling names, words, orders—things I couldn't understand.

Beyond them, I saw Jack standing. Beside him was the girl from the water's edge. Water dripped from her clothing and hair. As she held Jack's hand, she looked at me and pointed.

I reached toward Jack and whispered, "Save her."

I saw the terror in Jack's eyes as he stood motionless and stared at me.

"You've got to save the girl," I said again.

Jack looked around, knelt, and whispered in my ear, "There's no girl. It's okay, Caine. I gotcha. There's no girl. You're gonna make it. Just hold tight."

So much, so hard, I wanted to shout, "No. No. That's not it! You don't understand. That girl is the one we need. She's the key to all this!"

But all I could do was cough and buck. I could feel the floor's cold creeping into my body as the pain across my forehead intensified. I was at the point of forgiving everyone that had ever slighted me or anyone that I had mistreated. I thought about Jenna and was sorry about that also. I knew one thing for sure. I was about to die, and I could feel life slipping away. I think the only reassurance I was still alive was the pain. The excruciating pain. Man, getting shot hurts like hell.

Praise for Steven LaBree

COLD WATER CREEK:

“...a gripping and captivating mystery filled with twists and turns...lies, hidden secrets, and revealed truths. Difficult to put down...”

~*Jeanne R. Kraus, author of Cory Stories, Annie's Plan, and Get Ready for Jetty.*

Cold Water Creek

by

Steven LaBree

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

Cold Water Creek

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Dedication

This project results from many people—first, my wife and her unending dedication. We writers are quirky at times, but she has given me constant encouragement. She is my biggest fan and inspiration, along with Will and Claire, for creating great stories.

Chuck Dillaman was my partner in crime. Chuck was one of those people you meet, you feel an immediate connection. We spent many hours chatting about life and things that don't matter. We became good friends, and I will never forget our fireside chats. He, along with Harold, Roger, Miguel, and several others in the Florida Keys, inspire some of my characters.

Many believe a writer works alone. The truth is a story is the collaboration of many people. My publisher, a cover artist, my editor, proofreaders, all the writer's groups I have been part of, and all the beta readers that contributed to the project. My heartfelt thanks to all of you.

I truly hope you, the faithful reader, enjoy this novel. My objective and best intentions are to entertain and deliver a great story. As a reminder, everything I write is true, except for the parts I make up.

Chapter One

Sunrise, Florida—1987

Jefferson Caine stood under the porch at the front door of his parent's home, staring at the green doormat under his muddy boots. The fragrance of roses drifted across the porch from the garden, recalling a memory of him bringing flowers to Sara when he'd hoped to win her favor—as gentlemen often do to impress the one person they love.

What began as a casual conversation, expressing feelings for each other, hoping to talk about their future, escalated into something out of his control.

Rain pounded the porch roof as water rattled the gutters and rushed down the street. His thoughts blurred of Sara and what he had happened. He paused, closing his eyes, took a deep breath, trying to gather his composure.

He considered slipping into the house quietly not to disturb his mother or father. Leaning against the door frame, he wiped the dripping water from his brow, folded one leg over the other, and removed his left boot. It dropped to the floor with a thud.

He thought there would be trouble if he tracked mud inside the house. And then he almost laughed. *How stupid it was to be concerned about something so minor as mud. How would he tell his parents about*

Sara? He removed his right boot and set it quietly on the floor.

Reaching into his water-soaked pants for house keys, he realized they were still in the ignition of his van back at the bridge. He cringed as his heart constricted. He thought he heard Sara call his name.

Peering through the glass side panel of the door, he saw his mother, Joanna, under the glow of a tiffany lamp. She sat in his father's brown leather recliner, an open book on her lap, her head angled downward. He tapped lightly on the glass. She glanced at the mantle clock in the curio cabinet, placed her book on the coffee table, and opened the front door.

"Jeff? Where are your keys? You're soaked!"

"It's raining," he said as he stepped past her.

"Where's your van? You're getting water all over my floor. I have towels in the kitchen."

He sat at the kitchen table in the impeccably clean kitchen with spotless linoleum floors. The surface light under the microwave reflected off the pale green walls and a white ceramic tile backsplash aside the Formica countertop. Several towels, fresh from the laundry, sat on the kitchen table, awaiting transport to the back of the house.

With a shiver, Jeff collapsed onto the chair and wrapped a towel over his shoulders. His mother flipped the wall switch, lighting the three hanging pendulum lights above the island area, filled a stainless teapot with water from the sink, and placed it on the burner.

"What's wrong?" she asked as the water heated. "I'm making tea. It should warm you."

"It's nothing, Mom. Nothing." He wanted to tell her but couldn't find the words. He just sighed and

looked at her. "I don't want tea."

"No. It's never nothing when a son comes home without his van, and he's soaking wet. And very late, mind you. Obviously, there's a problem. Did you get into a car accident? Are you hurt? How did you get home?"

"Mom. Enough questions, and no, I wasn't in a car accident. I wish it were that simple."

Joanna settled into the chair next to him and placed her hand on his forearm. "Honey. What happened? Tell me." She pulled back, wrung her hands, and then put them between her legs. "Have you been drinking?"

"No, it's not like that."

"Drugs? You can tell me. I won't tell your dad."

"Mom." Jeff pleaded as he tilted his head back and focused on the ceiling. He exhaled. "Drugs or car accidents would be easy. Please. Just leave it."

"Then what happened? You can trust me to keep it between us, and whatever it is, I'm sure it's nothing we can't handle together."

"I'm not sure we can. I've really screwed up."

"There is nothing we can't overcome."

"Nothing we can't overcome?" Fists clenched, he stared at the table. "I don't think so. Not this time."

"Listen, honey. If you can't trust your parents, who can you trust? Just tell me what happened, and we can move on from there."

"My girlfriend is dead," he said without emotion. "How are we going to fix that?"

"Dead? Your girlfriend? How? What do you mean, she's dead?"

"It's not easy to explain," he said. "It was an accident. We argued about the baby."

“The baby? What baby?” Oh my God! Baby?

“Uh. Yeah. I kinda haven’t told you guys about all that stuff.”

“Jesus!” Joanna said. “You had a baby? With that girl?”

He was silent for a moment and lifted his gaze to meet hers. “Yeah. My girlfriend was pregnant, and she had the baby. What can I say?”

“Why didn’t you tell us what was going on? When did you think you would tell us?”

“Mom! Enough,” he snapped. “Yeah. We—. You can’t do it alone, Mom, and I was going to tell you. I just kept thinking there would be a good time, and then—well—there just wasn’t. Besides, didn’t you hear what I said? The baby is the easy part of this.”

“Sorry, honey. I know. You’re right.” Joanna pulled her chair closer and reached for his arm. “Talk to me, Jeff. You know you can.” She guided his wet hair behind his ears and gently brushed her hand across his shoulder, adjusting the towel. Jeff hung his head and sobbed. “It’s okay,” she said. “Let it out.”

Jeff knew this was a mother’s unconditional love. His mom’s kindness he had felt every day of his life. This situation was no different; he knew he could trust her with his darkest secrets. He sat back, inhaled deeply, and through an exhale, he said, “Okay.”

“You good?” she said.

“Yeah. I got it,” he said, adjusting his posture. “So Sara got pregnant and wanted to keep it quiet. I swear you could hardly even tell she was pregnant the whole time. Then he was born, and we needed to decide what to do. Long story short, she wanted to keep the baby. That’s what she said last week. But tonight, she said she

would put him up for adoption. I told her that was stupid. We could raise him. But then she said she could raise him herself and didn't need me. We argued all night about it."

"Whoa. Hang on a minute. You at the girl's house?"

"No. We were hanging at the bridge with the gang."

"Arguing?" she asked. "Couldn't the others hear you?"

Jeff sighed. "Well, not exactly. Everyone else was asleep under the bridge after escaping the storm."

"Why were they asleep?"

"Passed out mostly from the beer and pot."

"Oh, Lord. You were smoking pot?"

"No. Not me. The other guys did. I got there late because I had to pick up Sara from work. We stayed in the van because it was raining."

"We could have helped you."

"I know, Mom. I tried to tell her that, but she wouldn't listen. She told me that the baby wasn't ours. I knew he was our baby. I knew there wasn't someone else."

"So, what happened? You said you think she's dead?"

"I dunno. The conversation really heated up, and she got out of the van. It was still raining like crazy. She continued to argue after I got out and tried to convince her to go back inside. She pulled her arm out of my hand as I pulled her toward me. I said something—I don't remember exactly—but then she swung at me. She came at me again and I pushed her away. I was only trying to stop her and calm her down."

His mother nodded. "That's what you should do."

"Yeah, except when she jerked her arm from me, she tripped, slipped, or something. Anyhow, she fell backward and hit the ground, I thought. I tried to get her up, but she wouldn't move. I couldn't even tell if she was breathing. I figured she was unconscious, so I tried to pick her up. The rain was coming down hard, and my hands were wet, but when I pulled my hands away from her head, blood was all over them, and I saw it in her hair. She was lifeless. I tried to get her up again, but she was limp like a doll. That's when I saw the pipe thing that jutted out of the ground. I realized she'd hit her head on that."

"But not dead?" she whispered.

"I didn't think so. I dunno, Mom," he said as tears spilled over and ran down his face. "I carried her to the van, but I still couldn't get her to wake up."

"So, what happened then?"

"I don't remember. Honest. The next thing I know, I'm standing at our front door."

"Okay. I think you're in shock and are not making rational decisions. I'd ask your father, but that would make it worse. Let me think." She looked at him for a long moment, then stood. "Okay. We have to go. Come on."

"Go? Go where?"

"To the bridge, Jefferson. We need to check on your girlfriend. I realize decisions are tough for you right now, but we can't waste any more time. I am hoping she's alive and we can get an ambulance. God. Let's pray she is."

"I think she's dead, Mom," he cried, dropping his head into his hands. "What can we do?"

Cold Water Creek

“If Sara is dead, we have a bigger problem. Besides, she’s in your van, and if someone finds her before us, there will be a lot of explaining. You don’t want that. Let’s get over there. *Now.*”

The drive to the bridge was less than a mile. Joanna turned to her son. “I didn’t ask before with all the confusion. What’s the baby’s name?”

Jeff gave a sad chuckle. “That was the problem. Sara couldn’t decide on a name.”

“But you do that at the hospital when the baby is born.”

“You’re assuming the baby was born at a hospital.”

“Wasn’t he? I mean, how else?”

“It’s a long story, and we can talk about it later. I don’t really feel like discussing it right now.”

The rain had slowed to a drizzle. A light fog lay across the grassy field. Around the bridge was visible. Jefferson looked beyond the dash and checked out the dark area around the bridge for any activity. He swallowed hard but stayed silent.

Joanna opened her car door and stepped out. “Where are the others?”

“Over there. Under the bridge. You can’t see anyone. It’s too dark, but they’re there. Don’t worry—everyone is out like a light.”

“Where’s the girl?”

“She has a name, Mom. Sara. She would be in my van unless she left.”

He could only hope he’d been wrong, and she’d woken and gone home to their baby, somehow. They got out of the car and walked to his van.

Jefferson watched as Joanna opened the side door

of the van. Peering over her shoulder, he saw Sara's lifeless body. It almost looked like she was sleeping. Jeff pushed his mother aside and climbed in. Then he held Sara's hand. It was cold. He looked back at his mother through his tears. "See, Mom? Nothing."

His mother climbed into the van, touched Sara's neck and wrist. She pressed her ear against Sara's chest. Jefferson remained quiet, his cheeks wet as he watched, unsure who his mother had become.

"Follow me," she said and stepped out of the van.

Trembling, Jeff placed Sara's hands on her stomach, then swiped his arm across his face. He stepped out of the van and slid the door shut.

They stood at the front of the van. "Let me think for a moment." Joanna lit a cigarette as the rain started again. The wind increased, and the rain pelted them with big drops. The flashes of lightning brightened the dark sky.

"We don't have a choice," she said at last.

"What in hell are you saying?" Jefferson growled.

"I am saying your girlfriend is dead, and you will not go to jail for being stupid."

He looked at her. "Okay, but what does that mean? What do we do? I mean, we can't leave her here."

"Push it in," she said evenly.

"What? Push it *in the water*? The van?"

"Jefferson, you are not hard of hearing. Push the van down the embankment and into the water."

"The water? Are you out of your mind? What the hell?"

She reached out and touched his arm. "Listen to me. What's the alternative? Push the van into the canal and bury this problem before anyone sees us. There's

nothing we can do for Sara. She's dead. Do it. Now!" she hissed as she flicked her cigarette butt away.

"You mean leave her in the van and walk away? Just like that?"

"Jefferson. This is not science. Yes. In the water, walk away, and hope this goes away. We don't have a choice as I see it. What would you tell the police? You accidentally killed your girlfriend because she had your baby? I'm pretty sure that wouldn't work, would it? You'd spend the rest of your life in jail and destroy all of our lives. You already told me her father doesn't care where she is; her mother is dead. She has no one else that cares about her but you. Everyone will think she ran away. Now help me do this before your idiot friends wake up. Go on! Move it."

Jefferson reluctantly agreed with a nod. "Fine. Gimme a minute." He climbed back into the van and held Sara once more. He kissed her lightly, said goodbye, and again told her he was sorry.

He slid through the front seats, placed the transmission into neutral, and then walked to the vehicle's back. He looked at his mother, who waited, her hands bracing against the van's back doors.

"Ready?" she said.

"Not really."

"Push, Jefferson. You can grieve later. We're running out of time."

The van moved slowly toward the embankment. Their feet slipped in the mud as they pushed, and Joanna stumbled to her knees. Jefferson continued to push until he was almost waist-deep into the water.

Joanna got to her feet again, wiping the mud from her knees. Her son stopped as the van floated. As water

seeped into the vehicle, it tilted and bobbed. He watched as his van descended into the depths of Cold Water Creek.

The top of the van disappeared below the surface, replaced by a large plume of bubbles. As if on cue, the rain stopped. The waters flattened into black silence.

Jefferson continued to stare. Nothing remained but silence as lightning streaked across a western sky.

Joanna tried to remove some of the mud from her hands and wiped them on her blouse. Her whisper was harsh. "What the hell are you doing? Get out of the water and let's go!"

Jefferson turned and trudged to his mother's car. He looked back to the shoreline. Pulling the car door open, he got into the passenger seat. "Sorry."

"No time for sorry. We need to get out of here before your friends see us."

"It's not that. I just—"

"Just what? Second thoughts? Too late for that, son." She started the car, leaving the headlights off. She drove the car onto the street.

"No. It's just as I stood there watching. I just, I thought I heard something."

"What does that mean? You had better hope it wasn't one of your friends."

"No. I mean from my van when it was sinking. There was a noise I heard. I dunno. Maybe it was the water pressure collapsing the metal. It was something. A noise. A bump. Probably the thunder."

Jeff stared out the passenger window and occasionally sighed. Joanna turned into the driveway. "The lights are on in the kitchen. That's not a good sign. Your father is awake."

“Shit,” Jeff responded.

“Watch your mouth, young man, especially with your father. It’s early, and he will not be in a good mood.”

Quietly, his mother opened the front door, and they entered. Light from the kitchen shadowed the living room floor, and the aroma of fresh coffee filled the room. William, his father, sat at the head of the kitchen table, dressed in shorts and a T-shirt facing the kitchen doorway. Jeff followed his mother.

“Where have you two been? Is everything okay?”

Joanna placed her purse on the kitchen island. “The, uh, the van broke down.”

“Yeah. The van,” Jefferson echoed.

William placed his coffee mug on the table and pointed to the clock on the wall. “Let’s start again. What’s going on? You’re covered in mud and if the van had broken down, you would’ve got me up.”

Jefferson stood in the doorway with his head down. “I don’t know how to say this, Dad. I fucked up bad.”

“Your mother is in the room, so watch your language. My suggestion would be that you start at the beginning and get to the end of the story before I lose my patience.”

Jefferson paced the length of the kitchen and explained the story, avoiding eye contact with either parent. Once he felt he’d clarified everything, he sat at the far end of the kitchen table.

“So, let me get this straight. You hooked up with this girl from your school, got her pregnant, and now she’s dead,” William said.

Joanna interrupted. “We didn’t have a choice with the girl, Bill. I know it was wrong, but what were the

options? It wasn't like we were bringing her back to life. She was most definitely dead. I couldn't let Jefferson take the blame for this. You know they would put him away for murder."

William rubbed his forehead. "Joanna, if this comes back to haunt us, we *all* go to prison."

She touched the tissue to her eyes. "We will have to take that chance. My son—Our son will not go to jail."

"I get that, but my gut tells me to arrest him."

"Are you nuts? You can't arrest your son!"

"Of course I can. And I wouldn't be the first law enforcement officer to do that. But I said my *gut*, not my conscience. As parents, we need to protect him, but I also know what could be ahead. The courts will not be kind, and he'll be tried as an adult. Still, you need to understand what this means to this family, and to be honest, we either hide it to the grave or come clean right now and face the consequences."

Joanna stood. "Our son is not going to jail."

"What do we do then?" William pondered. "I guess the truth is both of you have rung the bell, so there's no going back now. I have a plan, but if it fails, we're doomed, destroying everything we've built." After a deep breath, he said, "But if you're determined, then we'll have to chance it." He stood from the table and walked to the window overlooking the garden in the backyard. "I have an idea. There is something I can do."

Perplexed, Jefferson looked at his father for the first time during the conversation. "Do?"

"Yes. That's what I said. Do. I have a plan, but I'll have to cross over to the dirty side to get what you

need. There's an informant that I have used from time to time. We have a good relationship, and he is a lawyer of sorts. Shady as hell, but he can get what we need. I'll talk with him, but it's going to cost us. Anyhow, you said there's a baby. That will complicate things, but it's a priority."

"Yeah, there is. At her house," Jefferson said. "You're not planning on harming him, are you?"

"Not a chance," William said. "You mentioned the girl lived with her father and has no other family, right?"

"True. And that guy is a drunk and doesn't care about Sara or the baby."

"Okay. I haven't figured out that part yet, but you should ensure the baby is okay. Your next move will be tricky and certainly not what I'd want for you, but it might save your ass. I make no guarantees, but from what I see, we don't have much choice if we're not coming clean." William sat and adjusted his chair to face Jefferson. "The first thing to do is to check on the baby. Make it look like you're going by to see your girlfriend. Make it as if nothing has happened. You're just there for a visit. Do you understand me?"

Jefferson nodded. "Actually, that should be easy," he said. "My guess is her father is drunk or passed out. Either way, he won't know what's going on."

"What about her mother?" William asked.

"Her mother died a long time ago. No one will be at Sara's, but her father."

"Okay. That makes it easier. You and your mother go. I'll wait here. Make sure the baby is clean, fed, and such. Then both of you get back here. I will work on what's next and one more thing. If you see someone or

the father is awake, deny everything. Don't say a word about anything."

After a change of clothes, Jeff and Joanna drove to Sara's house. It was seven o'clock in the morning, and the streets were quiet. Jeff approached the front door. He could hear the baby crying. He knocked, but no one answered. He knocked again, harder, then called Sara's name. He took a deep breath.

The door was ajar, and he pushed it open. Her father, unconscious, with a bottle of whiskey at his feet. Moving quietly, he stepped into the baby's room, picked up the infant, and comforted him. "Shhh, little one," Jeff whispered while he stuffed diapers and baby things into a bag.

He checked on Sara's father who was still snoring. He closed the door behind him and headed toward the street.

Joanna jumped from the car. "What are you doing with the baby?"

"What do you expect me to do?" Jeff asked evenly. "Leave him here? With that drunk ass? Mom, the old man is passed out on the couch, and Sara's not coming back. Without us, this baby won't survive. What else am I to do?"

Joanna rubbed her hands through her hair. "I get it, but oh boy, I don't think this is what your father had in mind. Come on. Get in the car before someone sees us."

Jeff got into the backseat of the car, carefully holding the baby snuggly against his chest. "We'll figure it out, Mom. We gotta figure this out. For his sake."

Jefferson stepped into his house with the baby in his arms. His father stepped from the kitchen. “You brought it home?”

“What were we supposed to do, William?” Joanna asked. “This child has no one.”

“Yeah, Dad,” Jefferson chimed in. “I didn’t have a choice.”

William threw his hands in the air. “Let’s not get started on you and your choices. This one isn’t one of your better ones, either.” He glanced at his wife. “You two have no idea how complicated this makes things. I suppose we’ll need to remedy this too, somehow.”

“You’re right, but how?” she said.

“The lawyer I mentioned earlier can fix this. He owes me a favor. This process will not be easy or cheap, but we can navigate it.”

Jefferson paced the room. “So, what now? What do I do?” He stared down into his son’s face, who was now quiet in his arms.

“All I know at this point is that our lives have just changed forever. This can be fixed, but there will be some significant changes. I’ll make some phone calls.” William looked over at his son. “Go pack your belongings. You won’t be coming back.”

“Where am I going?” Jeff asked.

“I have the same question,” Joanna chimed in.

“Listen—both of you. We need to act quickly; less than twenty-four hours. There’s a guy I know, Howard Devoit. He’s a piece of shit lawyer and keeps a low profile. The courts revoked his license to practice several years back. Anyhow, it seems he couldn’t get past a nice bottle of bourbon, which got him involved with some questionable characters, leading to some shit

we don't have time to discuss, but it was inappropriate for attorneys. He moved on and found his niche, so sometimes missteps can disguise themselves and become blessings. In this case, he carved out a profitable operation while keeping it under the radar to certain clients with money to remove their history. So, pack your bags, and we can head over there."

The building was a non-descript block-style square with a few windows at the end of the street off the main highway. Jeff remained quiet as they walked into the faded gray entry door. The office area was bleak and worn except for a neglected plant in the corner that was dying from dehydration. A fluorescent light fixture flickered above their heads. They approached a frosted glass window at the counter, and William slid it open.

A small woman sitting behind a computer monitor looked up from a solitary desk. "How can I help you?"

"I'm looking for the office," William replied. If someone was looking to do business with Devoit, they asked for the office. No one used the words lawyer, Howard, or Mr. Devoit. Subtle and under the radar was what Devoit demanded.

When she stood, William noticed her casual attire; blue jeans and a blue top. Her hair pulled into a ponytail. She pressed a button on the wall. A door to their left buzzed. They followed her down a long, unadorned hallway past the factory floor of humming machines and workers. They turned right through another door and opened a large wooden door leading to a reception area.

"Sit here. I'll be right back," she said and exited through a door at the opposite end of the room.

“This is kinda scary,” Jefferson said.

William nodded, his arms folded across his broad chest. “The truth is, you should be scared. Let’s hope this works. If it does, you may have a chance at a somewhat normal life.”

“What about the baby?” Jefferson asked, looking at the wall.

“Your mom and I will take good care of him.”

Jefferson shook his head. “I can take him with me and raise him myself.”

William’s laugh was harsh. “Yeah. That won’t cause any suspicion, will it? A young boy shows up alone in a new town with a baby. Yeah. That’s not going to work.”

“It could.”

William’s cheeks flushed as he shifted his posture toward his son. “Really? How’s that smart guy? How are you going to get a job? Create a new life? Along with worrying about how to raise a child?”

“I guess you’re right,” Jeff said.

“Damn skippy I’m right.”

Jefferson was about to speak again, but the woman came out of the office. “You can go in now.”

William and Jefferson walked in to see Howard Devoit standing behind an elaborate wooden desk. He was dressed casually in a striped button-down shirt, black slacks, and a precisely coifed comb over. The office was bare except for a table with a computer, a camera, and a printer.

“Marshal Caine. Good to see you again,” Devoit said as he rose from behind the desk.

“Good morning, Devoit. This meeting is an

unofficial visit, so no calling me 'Marshal,' please."

"Got it. What can I do for you, and who is this fine-looking young man with you?"

"This is my son, Jeff, and we need your services."

Jack sat behind his desk. "Sit, sit," he said. "To the point, as always, eh Bill? Onward and upward as they say."

"Yeah, great. Let's cut to the chase. I'll need your full cooperation and advice."

"Bill. We have quite a history, don't we? You know I can help you, but this sounds personal. Am I right about that?"

"You could say it's personal, but it needs to be completely confidential."

"Okay. Let's have it," Jack said, ready to listen to what his newest client needed.

"I need my son to disappear," Bill said. "Everyone, and I mean everyone, must believe he just ran away, left town."

Devoit leaned back in his high-backed leather chair and sighed. "Hmm. So, you want the full package. Erased. And then everything a new person will require moving on?"

"That's what I am thinking. Remember the Schilling case?"

"The one where we created an entirely new persona? You know no one has ever found that man," Devoit said. "What's it been? Twenty years?"

"I know, and that's a good thing. That's what I need, but there is something else I need, too," Bill said.

Jack sat forward in his chair and looked him in the eye. "Sounds complicated."

"It could be. There's a baby involved. He wasn't

born in a hospital, so there's no official birth record. These foolish kids thought it would just be their little secret," Bill said through a clenched jaw.

"Okay," Jack said, interlacing his fingers and placing his hands on the desk. "The Florida Department of Health has no birth record."

"That is correct. The baby doesn't technically exist."

"That makes it easier. I have a contact in that office. How do you want the records to read?"

"We need to have the document show it's our child. My wife, Joanne, and I."

"That's easy to do on paper. The neighbors might be a different story." He smiled at his humor. "So, Jeff needs a new identification?" He glanced at the boy. "How about his girlfriend?"

Jefferson's gaze stayed fixed on the floor. "She's already gone," William said evenly. "His new ID must be real, not the bullshit you give others. If you catch my drift, social security number, driver's license, the whole nine."

"I get it," Devoit said, getting to his feet. "Let me explain how I do this. Fake IDs are one thing; kids need them to get into bars and such, but those are flimsy and won't hold up. They work for bar bouncers and store clerks, but a cop will see faked a mile away."

"I need something solid," William said.

"I get that, so let me explain. Everything requires a social security number, so that's where we start."

"Like from someone that's died about the same age?" William asked.

"No. Not at all. That will get you caught, and I am a professional. When a person dies, so does the number

if associated. We use real people that no longer need a number.”

“Try me again on that. I don’t understand.”

“Mostly, our clients are homeless drug addicts and need money.” Devoit shrugged. “They will end up dead on the streets, so I give them a decent fake ID and cash. They turn over their actual information, and I use it for *my* clients. When the cops find them dead, they have an ID, so no one questions it. Of course, no one comes forward either, so the social security number we swapped remains good.”

“The shit we are doing for you. You’d better make your fresh start work. Damned good thing I retire next month.”

“Dad—” Jefferson started.

William cut him off with a wave of his index finger. “Don’t say a word. Let’s just get this done.”

Marshal William Caine reached for his wallet. “Retainer, I am assuming? Cash, of course.”

Chapter Two

Fort Lauderdale, Florida—March 2017

Jenna and I met in college, and other than the first couple of years, it's been downhill ever since. I tried to make the best of balancing police work with marriage, and I gave her space. Most of the time, she gave me mine. Looking back, I can see that was no way for us to have a long and happy marriage. Hindsight is perfect vision, right?

The real turning point was a Saturday morning, the weekend before I got shot, which only substantiated her claim.

The evening meteorologist predicted a great day for surfing was coming up. Jimmy and I wanted to take advantage, and it was a chance to escape reality. I was thinking of a couple of beers and chilling because, to be honest, surfing isn't a real sport in South Florida.

The coming weeks were going to be hectic with my latest assignment with my partner Jack. A van found at the bottom of Cold Water Creek. I needed a distraction before the new week started, and it seemed the weather was helping me move in that direction. Some surfing would do well to clear my head.

I was up early and kept quiet because I didn't wish to wake Jenna. With board shorts and a favorite T-shirt, I grabbed a mug of coffee from the pot on the kitchen

counter and headed outside.

Ducking under the garage door, it creaked open, reminding me to oil the hinges. I pulled my surfboard off the rack. It was all planned; pick up Jimmy, head to the beach, hit a couple of bombs, a nug or two, and then lay back with some cold beers in the afternoon. I slid my surfboard into the back of the Jeep.

That's when I heard Jenna. The creaking had attracted her attention. In my mind, I told myself a little squirt of oil would have saved the day. I wouldn't have heard the door or her. I thought about what Jimmy would say. "Shoulda, woulda, fucking coulda."

She stood in the doorway of our house, door wide open, in a pink cotton housecoat, matching faux feather pink slip-on bed slippers. "Carter! What are you doing?" she shouted loud enough to tell the whole neighborhood. "I told you I need you here today."

I looked over and cringed. With what Jenna was wearing, I hoped she'd get back into the house before our "conversation" became more of a spectacle than it was. I also figured that if ignored long enough, she would get bored and go away, and I could keep loading the Jeep.

As if.

I hung my head in defeat, knowing what was coming next. There was no choice at that point but to respond to her antics. If nothing else, perhaps I could appease her need for attention and get her to quiet down.

"I hire out that stuff, and you know that," I said. As the words left my mouth, I knew that was the wrong response. "Ya rang the bell," Jimmy would say every time I did something like that.

I shrugged it off because I didn't consider myself the problem. As well, I did not like conflict. It was not my strong suit, but I always stood up to her bullying manipulation. But it always ended the same way with me realizing what I'd done wrong. I turned back to my Jeep, knowing I was about to lose this argument.

All my days were getting harder to get through, always filled with the same drama. Jenna would have one hand on her hip, her foot tapping restlessly, and the other hand wagging in the air. She'd harp on me about what I'd done or not done.

Anyway, on that Saturday morning, the only thing I heard was fuckity, fuck fuck fuck. I did my best to ignore the ranting. I buried my head deep into the Jeep's interior and pretended to be busy. I hoped for the best outcome and prayed she'd step back into the house. She didn't. Of course.

"Yeah. Well, Carter," she shouted, "I have an appointment at the spa, and I told you last week. I scheduled the painters to start today on the house. Not next week, not next month. *Today*. I told you that three days ago, and I also told you I don't want them to be here unsupervised. Someone, and that someone is *you*, will need to be here because that *someone* is not going to be me."

"Well, butter my butt and call me a biscuit," I said under my breath, then removed my head from the back of the Jeep. "I told you about this exact thing during a conversation last week. It was well before you scheduled any painters. I told you, Jimmy and I were planning to surf this weekend if the weather was right. I specifically asked that you *not* schedule painters for this weekend. As usual, you ignored what I said and did

exactly what you wanted.”

My retort got me the total sum of nothing.

She looked at me with her head cocked sideways, hand on the hip, and said, “My nail appointment is at nine.” She flipped her nose to the air, turned, and shuffled back into the house. Being Jenna, before the door could close, she turned around and said, “You’re too old for this crap, Carter. Surfing is for the younger crowd. When are you going to grow up?”

I had honestly tried, during our marriage, to be a good husband. Whether I fought it, gave in, or tried to reason or compromise with her, I was wrong. I sat on the tailgate and dialed up Jimmy’s cellphone to give him the latest update.

Unpacking the surfboard, I recalled when Jenna was a lot of fun. Back in college, she was a different person, someone I loved to be around. Married life had seemed to dampen every reason we married in the first place.

To the most casual of observers, it was clear this weekend was now over. My only choice was to move forward with what I expected to be a shitty and uneventful day designed by Jenna.

There was nothing left to do but make another pot of coffee and wait for the painters to arrive. My day couldn’t get any worse, I thought. But then, of course, it got worse.

It always did.

The morning passed; the painters didn’t show. It felt like I had consumed enough coffee to fill a fuel tanker. Of course, as if I could read minds, I already knew Jenna would blame me. I gave the painters a

couple of more hours, just in case. By noon, I decided the painters weren't coming and tried to salvage the rest of the day.

I called Jimmy to see what was up, but he had made other plans. My nerves were jittery from all the caffeine, so I decided on a run to help calm them. I kept the T-shirt on and grabbed my running shoes and shorts.

Running was salvation and helped me get to that point where I could relax. The pounding rhythm of the shoes against the pavement helped me keep time with the music in my head.

At the end of the run, my heart was about to jump out of my chest. Worse, I was edgy, electricity crawling through my pores. The gym wasn't far from the house, so I kept running. Then I jogged home, showered, sat by the lake behind the house, and finished the day with a cold beer.

One beer turned into a few, but a few wasn't enough. A bottle of gin and a touch of tonic water fit the bill. That was the last I remember about that day, except for the Anvil Crawler. The lightning danced across the western sky, signaling me to go inside.

I awoke sometime later in a sweat. Through burning and bloodshot eyes, I saw the ceiling fan wasn't spinning. The power was out. My head pounded. My eyes were on fire, and other than a dim light coming in the windows, I had no idea of the time. That didn't surprise me, considering the pounding thunder before I blacked out. It felt early in the morning, but I didn't think I'd slept.

Most of the time, liquor or not, I sleep like a rock, and I hadn't dreamed in what seemed to be forever, but

now, the dream was back. Not only a dream, but a story I'd thought was over. It had haunted me since I was a young child; I always had the same dream, and I always woke at the same time. I didn't like it. There was nothing I could have done to stop it.

Maybe it was the liquor or the thunder. It could have been Jenna who had torqued me up for screwing up my weekend or a combination of all three. Regardless, I awoke knowing one thing, without a doubt. It didn't matter what had called it to life again. The dream was back, and it was about the little girl.

As far back as I can recall, she visited me at night when I was alone. Like clockwork, she woke me and tried to tell me something. When I was a kid, I tried to explain the dream to my parents, but they said it was my imagination. They thought she was one of those pretend friend things since I had only a few friends and no siblings.

But somehow, it felt too real to be my imagination. The dreams continued into my twenties. In that endearing way of hers, Jenna had always said to quit eating too many burritos for lunch.

Knowing what I know now, I wish friends, siblings, or even bad burritos had been the explanation.

Something always tells you the answer in the back of your mind, but you must listen. I learned that lesson the hard way. After what I discovered, I realized there wasn't any other way to understand the why behind the puzzle.

Regardless of the weekend and the drinking, I knew enough to know I was in my bed, and it was earlier than usual. Staring at the ceiling I was thinking, too early for work, but I couldn't stay there.

It surprised me to find Jenna asleep next to me. I hadn't heard her come in. Usually, after I'd had a drinking binge, she would sleep at the other end of the house, in a spare bedroom she created specifically for those occasions.

Her sleeping in our bed was confusing and not like her. I had no recollection of the night. I knew I could be a pain, but I tried to make it work. I believed I was sensitive and caring and couldn't understand why Jenna didn't see that. She stirred as if she could tell I was watching her, so I lifted the sheet and slid out.

Downstairs, I made coffee, then sat on the back-porch bench overlooking the lake where we lived. I thought about the days and nights. I thought about Jenna and what to do. The moon's light still shimmered on the water like a line of diamonds, making a peaceful setting. I wanted to enjoy the quiet moments. They were few and far between. My gut also told me things were about to change.

The disagreements with Jenna had become the norm. I accepted that. I believed the dreams had ended, but they hadn't. They were back, and that created an additional concern.

I knew, in the past, that when I felt things were going my way, it would all go south. With everything that had happened over the weekend, I was still at ease. I couldn't explain it, but it was like someone had removed a significant obstacle from my path. I should have known this was a sign. It seemed whenever life was good; everything would soon be upside down.

I'd left Jenna in bed, hoping she would sleep longer. But no, that would have been a different dream. She was up by seven. We passed in the hallway as I

was leaving for work.

“I’m not making breakfast,” she said. “Fend for yourself, and don’t get killed today.”

I didn’t respond. I wasn’t the bad guy here. I knew I didn’t cancel the painters. I’d just wanted a day to spend hanging with Jimmy that didn’t work out, and things got carried away afterward. So, I had a bit to drink. *So what?*

I grunted because her comment didn’t deserve a response. Rather than start the day with a fight, I kept quiet. My mind would not.

Nice, I thought. *She has such a way with words.* I grabbed a breakfast bar and headed to the office to pick up Jack.

Chapter Three

I watched her die a thousand times.

A life cut short by the ember of fear prowling within all of us. The errors in judgment and the stupidity of our actions as fear controls emotions. It takes only a moment for evil to come alive. It takes a lifetime to forget what you did at that moment. In the end, I discovered that with love, like fear, you can do anything, including murder.

The truth revealed; my answers were always there. Every clue was in front of my face, even if I couldn't see them. My shrink called it denial; you know the truth but don't believe it. You can't. Things like that don't happen to good people. Instead, you go through your life blind and trust that everything is fine. Your life is ordinary.

My name is Carter Caine, and the story I'm about to tell you happened to me. Otherwise, I never would have believed it. You've heard the line before: at the request of the survivors, we've changed the names. Then again, by the time we finish this story, there won't be many survivors.

I suppose my life is like a baseball game. Bases loaded, two outs. Your team needs a point to win. Just *one* point, and there is a chance for three. But the guy at bat has the worst average in the league. The pitcher has the best curveball in the league. So what do you do?

You pray and hope the dumbass at home hits the ball speeding towards him at somewhere around 100 mph, or maybe you get really lucky, and he'll get walked. Ya gotta have hope but you know none of that will happen. Your gut tells you, game over. But you hold on to your happy ass and hope for the best. You watch the pitcher. He winds up. The ball leaves his hand. And you lose all hope. You know it's game over. But as if some angel came down and blessed the hitter's bat, he swings and nails the damn ball in the sweet spot. And there is hope. The ball soars across the pitcher's mound just out of reach and directly into the shortstop's glove. Yup. Game over. Welcome to my life. Fucking shortstop.

Working as a detective can be a sedentary job. You sit at your desk and question people. There are days you talk to news reporters and do the general desk and investigative work. Often the job is routine. Crime happens, we find the bad guy, and the bad guy goes to jail.

My captain decides which detective best fits a case and assigns the workflow. My partner and I manage anything from petty theft to burglary, murder, and rape. Mostly, there's little to do but investigate something that's happened in the past. Once you've resolved a case, you tackle the next one. Of course, there is *always* another one.

The years of police work shaped my mind and my thought process. I also learned that people could surprise me. They never seem to be who they appear to be. The average citizen—often witnesses—seem to believe there's something special about killers. They think they can pick one out of a lineup based on looks alone.

They've said things like "he's scruffy," or "he has shift eyes," or my favorite, "he looks suspicious." Even before my training and experience, I somehow sensed it was much more complicated than that.

The average citizen believes they would see the look of a murderer. That specific look about them telling you I could kill.

To the untrained citizen, murderers look like murderers—crazy looks like crazy. Yet, I knew that was far from the real world. I learned a lot over the years about murder, crime, and how people think, but with our recent case, my gut said it would be different this time. This investigation would change everything I had ever believed—every fact, detail, and everything I knew as a cop or a human being.

Some people say life ends at death—the eyes close, and everything goes black. It's all over; there's no afterlife, there's no heaven. You dig a hole, toss dirt on the coffin, and that's the end.

Sure, we've all heard stories about a bright light or maybe your body floating overhead and looking down at a seemingly lifeless body—yours of course. That one makes me chuckle.

Some folks say the soul stays around to watch and protect the people we love. Me? I figured all that was bullshit except for the dead-is-dead-thing, since none of the people retelling stories about *being* dead are *actually* dead.

Other than that, I didn't have answers or preconceived notions about death. I had never died before. But sometimes, thoughts about dying consumed me. My conclusion was a combination of all those things. I thought I had it all figured out at one point in

my life. My story proves that anything can happen; anything can be real, and just about anyone can kill you. Even with all that, I am not so sure about how life *or* death works. I know this. I left Jenna sitting in our kitchen as I left for work, thinking it would be a typical day. Nothing has ever been the same since. Fucking shortstop.

Everything that you'll read after this is the story of my life—my second one. If I'd begun with the story of my *first* life, you wouldn't understand my second life. Confused? Think about how I feel about that.

I discovered one truth after I recovered from the gunshot. In the end, truth floats to the surface through all the crud and crap called life. Sometimes, it's dumb luck. Sometimes, it's good police work. Sometimes, the dead walk right back into your fucked-up life and tell you everything, whether you want to hear it or not.

Oh, and there's one more thing I know about killers: they look just like you and me.

The workday started as it always did, for the most part. Sure, it'd been a tough weekend between me and my wife, Jenna, but that wasn't groundbreaking news. I mean, our marriage started like gangbusters right out of college, then a few years passed, and the everyday set in. She came from a wealthy family, and I got the feeling she didn't want me to be a cop.

The problem was, I am a cop. A real cop. I live and breathe it every day like it was my destiny to be what I am. The best news was that my partner Jack, and I had a new assignment, and I could bury my feelings in my work, and the weekend was now a faded memory.

“Looks pretty open and shut. How much more of a waste of time could we get?” I asked Jack.

He shrugged and handed me the summary, so I leaned back in my chair and gave it a quick read-through.

“Go see Captain Daniels when you finish,” Jack said, then walked down the hallway.

A city maintenance crew assigned to clearing city property had discovered a van in a Florida canal. My experience and my *mind* said it wouldn't amount to much. My *gut* told me something else. Hell, we found vehicles at the bottom of canals in Florida all the time. We often find it's some citizen trying to claim an insurance loss or a teenager on a joy ride with their friends looking to hide the evidence.

The teenagers would steal a car and joy ride around town. It was a rite of passage I didn't experience, not with a US Marshal for a father. Anyway, they'd stop to get a pizza or convince some sucker to buy them beer at the local convenience store. After a night of the usual stupid teenager antics, they'd dump the car in a canal so the police or their parents wouldn't find out. I hated those cases, but it had been a slow month. I assumed my captain thought it was something to keep me and my partner busy.

In that I am a homicide detective, my first thought was the case belonged to Auto Theft. *Was this my captain's way of paying me back for being, well, me?* As I sat in front of his large, battered desk, with three paper coffee cups of a brown liquid filled to different levels, many considerations crossed my mind.

“You gonna drink those?” I motioned toward the cups.

“They get cold, and I don’t like cold coffee.”

“So, you’re keeping them for who?”

Captain Daniels nudged his head toward Rick Taylor, the head of our Auto Theft and Recovery Unit. “Shut it, Carter, and listen up. They need some help, and you guys are doing a lot of nothing lately.”

I sat there thinking, *those guys were a bunch of numbskull losers in my book. This case is ridiculous and insulting.*

That was my thought until Daniels shared the complete story. “You can wipe that annoyed look off your face, Caine. It’s not only about a van in the water.”

I felt that same familiar pang in my gut. “But that’s what you said, right?”

“Looks like you had another rough weekend.”

“Let’s say it was interesting and leave it at that.”

“Let me guess. Jenna wanted you to do something, and you fucked up. She got mad. You had a few too many—.”

“That’s enough, Captain. I get it.”

“Do you? I mean, you’ve gotta get your shit together before it affects your job.”

“It’s not and it won’t. So, why the Auto Theft case?”

“That was my point. You missed the part in the summary about the remains.”

“Remains?”

“Yeah. Seeing if you were paying attention. There are remains.”

“No shit. Well. That changes it up.”

“Yeah, and with that, you get my point. You are a brilliant detective and need to stop letting your personal life interfere with things.”

“Got it. Priority one.”

“Anyhow, it appears it *was* a body. Only bones right now. To ID the victim, the initial challenge will be the timeline,” he said. “The van was at the bottom of Cold Water Creek a very long time.”

“How long is long?”

“Unknown. Twenty-plus years? Maybe thirty. We know that much.”

“How do you know that already?”

“The van pulled from the water is an older Dodge van. It’s in terrible shape, meaning it’s been there for a while. There aren’t too many of those left on the road, and there haven’t been for a while. I’m guessing somewhere around twenty-five to thirty years. We’ll know more soon. Should be a VIN on the block.”

“Gotcha. I’ll grab Jack and keep you posted.”

I wasn’t thinking about the case other than as a distraction from my wife. After the last weekend with her tantrums, the case would keep my mind occupied, at least.

Jack told me it looked like a bullshit case and wanted to be rid of it as soon as possible.

“What’s your rush?” I asked.

“I got a fishing tournament this weekend in Islamorada with friends,” he said. “It’s for a good cause, and I wanna be there.”

“Me too,” I said. “Let’s bury this thing and do it.”

As the words left my mouth, I got that gut reaction again. Jack must have seen me cringe. “You good?”

I winced. “Yeah. I’ll be fine.” I said it, but I didn’t believe it. The case wouldn’t be easy to solve. Something was missing, and something in the back of

my mind was poking me.

I'd seen thousands of faces in my years as a cop. Over those years, I discovered I had a natural gift. I could identify trouble long before it happened, pick out a suspect, or have a good idea of the suspect's identity. It was like my school days when I just "knew" stuff I had no way of knowing.

Of course, some of my abilities probably came from working with the criminal element. Eventually, a cop develops a propensity for spotting the characters. We meet them all the time, and it seems the same type of person finds themselves in trouble with the law. Of course, that was my theory, and everyone who met me knew I had a mind of my own.

My first thought was that the victim was driving the van and ran it off the embankment. It just so happened there was a canal in the way. The victim drowned, making it a simple case of accidental death in a van pulled from the water.

The Auto Theft team would get busy with the specific steps for evidence gathering and processing the incident. Of course, with the crime scene being at least thirty or more years old, there wouldn't be much of a scene to investigate.

For this investigation, the forensics team would identify the van. The Medical Examiner would identify the body. They'd tell us who it was that died in the accident, and we notify loved ones. If there are any, that is. Simple as it gets. The case would get closed, and we'd be onto the next case. I shook my head. There was nothing simple or easy about my life.

Jack looked at me. "So, what's the plan?"

I shrugged. "Usual. Let's go chat with the ME and

see if he has anything.”

“I have never liked the Medical Examiner’s office,” he said.

“Fine. You can sit in the car while I go in.”

The van, the remains, and all the clues were at the Medical Examiner’s Office. Dr. Artemis Rite was the head of forensics and the prime investigator. Most of the time, he was temperamental and demanding. That day was no different.

Everyone knew the city was planning on developing the Cold Water Creek area. They had grand plans to make it a friendly park for everyone to enjoy, including a small pier and a new boat ramp. There was always a makeshift ramp, nothing more than sloping dirt into the water for small boats and kayaks. The waterway was a popular place for kids back in the day. I considered how curious it was that the police discovered a death as the city planned a new family park. Go figure.

The investigation, what we knew so far, rolled around my head during the drive. There were no leads, but the case was new, and Jack and I hadn’t dug into the details. I was hoping to see if the ME had discovered any specific evidence that might tell me where to start.

Jack’s stomach growled, loud enough to remind me I’d missed breakfast. After the less than a spectacular weekend and the squabble with Jenna about me surfing and canceling the painters when I didn’t, her Monday morning instruction to me was, “I’m not making breakfast, so fend for yourself and try not to get killed today.” Yeah. Welcome to my life.

Before lunch could happen, the morning lent itself to a homicide and autopsy details. Then we'd go about the business of investigating leads, then head for lunch as usual.

"Before we head over to Rite, how about a quick stop for some Cuban?" I asked.

"Cuban?" Jack asked.

"Yeah. Sorry, Cuban coffee."

"Gotcha. Like Espresso! Sounds perfect."

"Sort of," I said, grasping that Jack's New York taste buds didn't have my South Florida appreciation.

The Versailles Cuban Bakery sat amid iconic Little Havana in Miami, and most days, a stop there was part of my morning routine. But it was new to my partner, Jack Nelson. I thought he'd enjoy it.

I liked to get Café Con Leche and a pastelito, a small, baked, sweet pastry. Whenever we had an active case, I had a routine that seldom faltered: a quick visit to the bakery and then on to the Dade County Medical Examiner's office on northwest 9th Avenue in Miami. Of course, Jack preferred his black espresso with no sugar, so I had to explain that to the young woman behind the counter.

My pastry was just a memory, and my coffee down a quarter of a cup, we headed for the morgue. On an earlier call, Doctor Artemis Rite told me the evidence wasn't notable. I hoped he'd discovered something else to help us solve this case.

Jack got the car keys after I pulled into a parking space. "I probably won't be long, but you may need the AC. Don't go anywhere without me, partner."

The ME's office has a low-key exterior. It's a white building with one sign that reads in small letters.

If you're not paying attention, you'll pass it. I think it's by design because who wants to know where they store the dead bodies? Once inside, it's easy to navigate. Then again, I had been there before. I scanned my access card, and the airlock doors opened. I walked to the fourth doorway on the left.

Doctor Rite wore a white smock, a plaid button-down shirt, and a royal blue bow tie. His eyeglasses rested at the end of his nose, and he hunched over a long metal examination table. He peered through a giant magnifying glass attached to an extended arm. The formaldehyde aroma assaulted me as I pushed open the examination room doors. I placed a handkerchief over my nose as I moved beside the ME. Rite guided the magnifying glass above the table to scan the skeletal remains.

Without looking up, he said, "Can't handle the smell, Caine?"

"It's not that."

He just nodded. "Is that right? Where's Jack?"

"Dude. It stinks in here," I said. "How do you work like this? Jack is in the car."

"Like what?" Rite said.

"Whatever. You look like my mom when she's at the jewelry store."

"What's that mean?" he said, not amused but continued. "You know, one day, Jack will have to come inside the building. It's inevitable."

"Yeah. I got that. What I meant was, you know, standing at the counter looking for the latest timepiece or bracelet for her collection. Smoking your pipe and looking all debonair."

Rite didn't look impressed. "So, this is all we

have?” he asked, using his pipe tight in his grip as a pointer.

I crossed my arms, hoping to ward off the room’s cold. Standing at Doctor Rite’s left shoulder, I examined the bones, which looked like brown sticks. They were strewn haphazardly on the metal table.

He nodded. “That’s all we have, at least, so far,” he said. “Forensics is continuing to dig through the van.”

I paused for a moment, thinking I should say something else, and that I always felt less than adequate around Rite didn’t help my comfort level any. “There’s a lot of scum and crap in there.”

He turned and looked at my shirt. “Speaking of scum and crap, what did you spill on your shirt?”

I looked down. “Oh, that. Jack and I stopped for a coffee at Versailles on the way over.”

“And mine is where?” he asked, one brow arched high.

“Oh. Sorry. I was so desperate this morning I didn’t think,” I said and made a mental note never to forget again.

“Let’s try this,” Doctor Rite said. “Let’s arrange the bones to simulate a human skeleton as best we can. We must take into consideration it’s all we have.”

“Sounds like a plan,” I said. “May be tough with so few bones.”

Rite looked up and said, “Oh. That’s not a problem. I have plenty of extras here and about. We can use them as fillers.”

I stared at him, but I wasn’t sure he was kidding. Then I saw him chuckle. “Just a joke, kid. Relax.”

“At least, it seems, she didn’t drown,” I said.

“What do you mean by that? I never said she did or

didn't, and, perhaps you've forgotten, I am the guy that determines the cause of death."

"Uh. Sorry. You're right. I was assuming."

Rite continued to place the bones in what he believed were their most likely locations. He paused and scratched his head, adjusted his eyeglasses, and sighed. "Let me explain," as he turned toward me, "There was a cranial impact, but it doesn't seem serious enough to cause death. More likely, the victim had a condition referred to as catalepsy brought on by blunt trauma to her skull. I am not saying she was alive, but I can't say she was dead. Honestly, my assumption would be the impact, whatever caused it, was enough to make the victim unconscious."

"But not dead?"

"It's a tough call. If we had the internal organs, that's one thing. We don't. We have bones, and all I have to go on is a cranial impact, so my report will read the cause of death as blunt trauma because that is the only diagnosis I can provide accurately. We also need to classify this to know how to handle the case."

"So like accidental, murder, self-inflicted?"

"Exactly. I am going to assign this as a murder investigation."

"Agreed."

"Thanks for your input. As I said, murder. I want to ensure we cover everything. For example, she could have drowned because the van went into the canal."

"Got that, but it would be an accidental death."

"Right. But we have evidence of blunt trauma to the back of her head. So, I deduce a hit on the cranial region and dumped into the van."

"I can see that."

“But what you don’t see is the severity of the blunt trauma. It didn’t break through the skull; it cracked it. That’s what leads me to the theory of catalepsy.”

“Are you saying she wasn’t dead when the van entered the water?”

“Thanks for keeping up. That’s exactly what I am saying. Theory, of course, but backed by science and fact. There was a case in Mexico. They prepped the man for autopsy, marked, and everything. The weird part of it is that three doctors said he was dead. He wasn’t and woke up on the table awaiting autopsy.”

“Good thing he did.”

“That’s what I’m saying. But that’s not a mistake we can make here since there’s nothing but bones. So, like I started to say, not much to go on, but at least I can determine she’s a she.”

“How’s that?” I asked.

“Simple. See this bony ridge above the eye? It’s sharper in females than males. Females also have rounder or more pointed lower jaws than males, whose jaws tend to be squarer. Either way, most of the rest of the bones are missing. Is there anything else coming?”

“I don’t believe there is anything else. It seems the forensics team collected only fifty-two bones along with a skull. That’s what you have, right?” I asked.

“That’s it,” Rite said as he clenched his pipe between his teeth. “We are a bit short of bone structure, and I don’t expect all the bones, but something closer to two-hundred would be helpful.”

“Can we identify anything?” I asked.

“Not much,” said Rite, “but at least we have the skull, which means my forensic artist will create a clay replica to give us a better idea. I’ll shoot you a picture

of it as soon as we're done. Also DNA might match something if she is in the system. Still, with the contamination of the water and the evidence being this old, that's a slim chance. There is one other thing I found that might interest you."

"Really? What is it?"

"In the slime, after cleaning all the debris from the skeleton, I uncovered a high school class ring, a thin gold chain, and what appears to be a plastic hair clamp."

"Now that's a positive lead," I said. "Anything else?"

"Other than young, female, and dead?" Rite asked. "No."

"That's her ring, you think?"

"I'm about ninety-nine percent sure on the dead part, but a hundred percent sure that's not her ring," Rite said.

"Sorry. What?"

"Too big. It's a male's ring."

"Got it. It's a start, at least. Anything else?"

"Well, Detective Caine. The mentioned class ring, about the only solid confirmation we have, shows the evidence is around thirty years old, so there's that. There is not much more to talk about until the forensics team returns with information on the vehicle."

"Is there anything else you tell me about the ring?"

Rite looked up from the table as if I had said something stupid. "Rather obvious, don't you think? Either it is a male's ring, or the victim had huge hands. I doubt that because the rest of her basic structure leads me to estimate she was about five feet tall," Rite said. "That being the case, most kids get rings in their

sophomore to junior year. Take that into consideration. Not that it means anything. After all, I am only a doctor, and you are the detective.”

I shook my head. “Yeah. I got all that, Doc. So, this is a thirty-year-old case. Back then, it was popular to wear the boyfriend’s high school ring on a chain around the neck. We’ll start checking for unsolved missing persons in that time frame.”

“Good thinking, Carter. It’s like you’re a genius or something. Now you only need a name, and you’re done. Then you can go home.”

“Funny, Doc. If you can clean the ring, perhaps we can determine the name of the high school. And sometimes, there are inscriptions inside those rings. Then, since there was a ring, the boy was about seventeen or eighteen years old, so the girl was probably about the same age. That’s where I was going with this.”

“As I said, Carter. It’s like you’re a genius or something. Let me get right on that and scrub that ring for you,” he said as he moved the examination glass out of his way.

“Smartass.”

“Not this guy. Call me later.”

“Tell you what, Doc. Do what you can. Me and Jack will grab some lunch and then talk to some folks. I’ll call you this afternoon.”

Rite waved me off, turning his attention to the table. He reached for the microphone hanging from the ceiling to turn on the voice recorder. He rattled off details as if he were making a grocery list. “Female. Approximately five feet zero inches. Skeletal remains only—bone count fifty-two, including a skull. Severe

water damage is not remarkable. Cranial fracture evident unknown origin. Don't forget to scrub the ring for Carter." His voice faded as the examining room door closed.

I walked back to the sedan. As I opened the door, Jack asked, "Anything?"

"Well, we didn't start well," I said.

"What happened?"

"First off, we ticked him because we didn't bring him a coffee, but other than that, he was okay. He offered no evidence to speak of at this point. Well, some minor stuff, but nothing to go very far on. We know the victim is a girl, and the van has been in the water for about thirty years. We've got some research to do. You ready to hit lunch?"

"Yeah. I'm starving, and I can't wait to dig into something Italian today," Jack said.

"Okay, yeah, me too. I'm thinking of a big bowl of pasta, but first, the ATM."

Jack frowned. His grumpiness wasn't unusual. Today, he seemed worse than expected from the summer heat and an assignment that appeared impossible to solve. I shut the car door and headed to the ATM. My mind reeled with details and what-if scenarios. *Thirty years*, I thought. *Rust, sludge and old bones pulled from the canal's depths were the only evidence.*

The DNA, if there was any, might shine a light. It was our only hope at this point. Rite said tests could take months or longer. More evidence or identification could surface, but what could it provide? Even then, the evidence would be sketchy.

Then there was the vehicle's identity and the call

our captain had received from the FBI that said they believed this could be part of a serial killer they were tracking. They mentioned they would like us to keep them informed of the progress and offered assistance in tracking the vehicle. It was their way of involving themselves without taking over the case. The problem was the FBI always took their time researching, and this was a thirty-year-old cold case rust bucket. No worries, I thought. It's our job to solve cases, and we will keep moving forward.

Lost in thought, I realized I was staring at a dead ATM. Perfect, I thought. *Is this how my whole day is going to go?*

I looked over to my partner sitting in the car and pointed to the bank doors. The look on his face showed his impatience. He was hungry.

He turned his attention to the hot dog vendor cart. Shaded by a blue and yellow umbrella advertising New York Style hotdog, it was tempting. He waved me off, and I saw his lips move. "Speed it up." He tapped his watch for emphasis.

The pastelito breakfast didn't last long, and lunch was high on the list of priorities. It wouldn't work without cash, and I knew Jack wasn't the type to buy lunch for anyone. All I needed to do was get some money from the teller, get through the day, get back home, have a couple of beers, and watch the game. A simple process if you think about it, but we are talking about my life. Nothing is ever simple with Carter Caine.

Jack stepped out of the car, deciding to grab a hotdog while he waited. No surprise there.

I started for the doors at a jog.

Chapter Four

Once inside the bank, I saw that several teller lanes were open. Helen Kowalski was at the last line, and I liked her. She also had the shortest line, and experience had taught me Helen was always efficient. I knew she would get me out of there quickly. We made eye contact, and she gave me a nod. Knowing Jack's impatient nature, I checked my watch and figured it wouldn't take long to get my cash.

It was eleven fifty-five in the morning, and my stomach grumbled, reminding me what the wife said about not getting myself killed today as she shooed me out the door. *Thanks, honey*, I thought again. Of course, not getting killed was always high on my priority list.

I scanned across the people milling around within the bank, a habit of mine. When my eyes stopped scanning, I noted the characteristics of each one and moved to the next. That's when I noticed a squirmy little guy. He wore a Red Sox ball cap and charged through the front doors like he owned the bank. I knew he didn't.

"Sonovabitch," I mumbled as I felt a spasm in my stomach, and it wasn't from a lack of food or the fact the punk wore a Red Sox ball cap in south Florida.

It was that feeling again. I can only describe it as standing on the edge of a cliff or a tall building. You look over; you believe you will not fall to your death,