
Opening Extract from...

The Cantaloupe Thief

Written by Deb Richardson-Moore

Published by Lion Fiction

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All the characters in this book are fictitious and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Published by Lion Fiction
an imprint of
Lion Hudson plc
Wilkinson House, Jordan Hill Road
Oxford OX2 8DR, England
www.lionhudson.com/fiction

ISBN 978 1 78264 192 6
e-ISBN 978 1 78264 193 3

First edition 2016

Acknowledgments

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Printed and bound in the UK, March 2016, LH26

Prologue

July 5, ten years ago

Alberta felt every one of her 80 years, felt them deep in the rigid muscles that supported her slender neck. Her Fourth of July party last night was exhausting in a way it hadn't been in previous years. This morning's pancake breakfast with her teenage granddaughters was raucous, at least by her standards. She loved the girls, God knew, loved them with a ferocity that surprised her. Still, their exuberance was wearing.

She eased onto the sagging den sofa, solicitous of her aching hip, and kicked off her ecru pumps. Her Chihuahua Dollie hopped up beside her, head cocked, waiting for a pinch of bread crust.

"Dollie, you're my best girl," she said, giving the cinnamon-colored dog a small bite. "Though I don't think poor Amanda wants to compete."

The *tete-a-tete* earlier with her only daughter had been as difficult as she'd imagined, disclosing the long-held secret about her younger son, the family rogue. Alberta could tell that Amanda was shocked. "At least, that shut her up about my so-called dementia," she told Dollie.

Then the doctor's visit with her older son, the stalwart one, the one she trusted. She'd given him a hard time over the years, she knew. But he'd remained steadfast.

Now all she wanted was to curl up on the end of this worn sofa with her sandwich and potato chips and a glass of Tabitha's sweet iced tea. Her maid brewed tea better than the maids of anyone in her bridge club. Everyone said so.

This den off the kitchen was a sanctuary of shabbiness and warmth, unlike the high-gloss rooms with their hardwoods and brocade draperies and gleaming piano. She enjoyed those rooms, of course, enjoyed their cool elegance. That's where she entertained her book club and bridge club and music club. Though she'd had about enough of those music club biddies tut-tutting over the homeless man who'd shambled into her parlor last month and sat down at the piano.

"My lands, Alberta!" she said in a high-pitched voice for Dollie's enjoyment. "That man could have killed you for yoah wedding silvah."

Alberta had no use for fear or flightiness.

She fed Dollie a broken chip, then punched the remote control for her soap opera, sighing at the simple pleasure of this break in her day. She took a bite of sandwich – banana and crunchy peanut butter on white bread, a combination she'd enjoyed since girlhood yet hid from those same music club friends. With them, she'd choose chicken salad. "Or cucumber, God forbid," she said aloud.

"Dollie, whoever invented the cucumber sandwich should be shot. Now banana, I understand that's what Elvis ate. So don't tell anyone."

She savored the combination of peanut crunch and firm banana. She was reaching for a chip when she heard a knock on the kitchen door. Her heart sank. Probably Amanda, early for their trip to the lawyer's office. She wasn't ready to see her daughter yet.

No, wait, Amanda had a key. It wouldn't be her. The knock came again.

Sighing, Alberta rose and slipped her pumps back on. A Southern lady never answered the door, even the back door, without shoes.

Dollie followed, nails click-clicking on the linoleum. Alberta opened the door, puzzled, surprised, though not entirely displeased to see her visitor. After a few words, though, she was more than displeased. She was outraged. Dollie picked up on her fury and yapped ferociously, threatening to trip Alberta by skittering around her feet. Alberta slammed the door.

She pivoted to return to the den, to her lunch, shaken, but certain she'd settled things. That's how she lived her life, always certain, always settling things properly.

Only now she heard a crash, and turned in disbelief to see a rock land on the kitchen floor, accompanied by a rain of shattered glass. She cried out in anger – red-hot, shocked anger that turned to fear only in the last moment of her life.

Chapter 1

Present day

Branigan Powers rushed into the newsroom, its silence still disconcerting though the layoffs had been steady for years now. It was 9 a.m. and the remaining *Metro* and *Style* writers were filing into the conference room for their weekly meeting, led by Julie in a hot pink sheath, pink-tinted hose and shoes of improbably colored pink leather.

Branigan grabbed her battered construction worker's Thermos and Christmas coffee cup and followed. Christmas was seven months away, and the mug with its sinister elves was truly ugly to boot. But because she had a habit of breaking ceramic mugs, she carried the one she'd miss least.

Julie was already seated at the head of the table when Branigan slid into one of the many empty seats. Settling back with a steaming cup of coffee, she squeezed her eyes into a squint and let Julie's monochromatic attire blend into a Spandex bodysuit.

It always worked. With her blond ponytail, 26-year-old complexion and unremitting color coordination, Julie Ames metamorphosed into the aerobics instructor from Helstrom – Helstrom being the chain that was gobbling up newspapers from Virginia to Florida and remaking them in the relentlessly cheery style favored by the attention-deficit crowd. The chain didn't have *The Grambling Rambler* yet, but its reporters knew enough about the state of the industry to know it wouldn't be long.

They were the dance band on the *Titanic,* playing feverishly to keep from thinking about the freezing water just inches away. Chirpy Julie was the publisher's way of lowering a lifeboat to see if the chain's methods had anything to offer before abandoning ship.

"I've been talking to Tan," Julie began with a bright smile, "and we read some interesting statistics in Sunday's paper. The story on mobile home safety said that Georgia is one of the four leading states in manufactured housing."

She looked around as if waiting for the reporters to acknowledge this fact as ground-shaking.

"Along with Texas, Florida and Alabama." Her smile lost a shade of its luster. "Sooooo … we want to incorporate those people into *Living*!"

Living! – the exclamation mark was an official part of the name – was the weekend arts/dining/recreation/decorating tabloid that had replaced the old *Trends!* section, that had replaced the old *Home!* section, that had replaced the old *Georgia Homes* section, back when two less excited words were allowed. All reporters had to contribute to the section, regardless of what actual news they might be covering.

There was a sound of choking as someone's coffee got caught mid-slurp. Marjorie, 60ish, raspy-voiced and very un-Helstrom, was the first to speak. "Tanenbaum Grambling IV wants us to write about trailer decor? Like he's ever been inside one?"

"Well, that's not exactly the point," said Julie, who got a little flustered when confronted by Marjorie. "The point is we've been doing a lot of rich people's homes and historic homes and renovated farmhouses. And that's fine. But those

people already take the paper. We're trying to reach non-subscribers and we may find them in our … um … mobile home… ah … subdivisions.

"Now I don't mean go out and find just any trai … , mobile home," she continued hastily. "We'll want to find just the right one to show what can be done with the proper décor and color sense."

She was nodding now, trying to get agreement through sheer motion.

Lou Ann turned a saccharine smile Julie's way. "Oh, like a doublewide."

"Yes!" Julie pounced on Lou Ann with relief. "A nice spacious one that's done in lake cottage or minimalist or something else real cute. Now, who wants to do the first one?"

Six pairs of eyes studied the conference table. Hard.

"Harley, what about you?"

Harley, the only one at the table even close to Julie's age, looked up with 'possum-in-a-flashlight eyes.

"Me? Well, I wouldn't mind … but um … I'm working on that lake house and the Main Street apartment." He was rolling now. "And I figured you would want me to finish up that teen dating story."

A faint crease appeared between Julie's impeccably plucked brows. "I guess you're right."

Branigan looked at Harley in admiration. She caught his eye and raised an eyebrow in salute. He tried not to smile.

Undaunted, Julie pressed on. "Branigan, how about you?"

"Gee, decorating trends in trailers," she answered. "Good as that sounds, I'm up to my ears in a story Tan asked me to look into."

An overworked excuse, but safe. The rest of the newsroom was a black hole to Julie, and the evocation of publisher Tan's name was a bona fide "Get Out of Jail Free" card. Marjorie and Lou Ann rolled their eyes.

Julie glanced briefly at police/court/political reporter Jody Manson, then thought better of it: He was apt to get called to something more urgent at any time. Her eyes flicked to arts writer Gerald Dubois, engrossed in his latest *Art in America* magazine. Few people on the staff remembered when Gerald was Jerry Dubert from neighboring South Carolina, the unhappy oldest son of a clan of hunters and fishermen. Here, in northeast Georgia, within driving distance of Atlanta, Jerry had bloomed into an imaginative if overbearing arts critic. And if, as Gerald Dubois, he had re-invented his identity, few people knew. Or cared.

Certainly not Julie, brought in eight months before by Tan-4, as the staff called him behind his back, to see if a shake-up in the newsroom might staunch the bleeding in his family-owned newspaper. It was a route traveled by all the chains as they squeezed American papers for profits. Readers had neither the time nor the attention spans for long, in-depth articles, or so the reasoning went. Give them short. Give them lively. Give them perky.

It was enough to make Branigan wish she were 65 and at the end of her career. Instead, she was 41, and had some decisions to make.

Julie started to talk trailers to the perfectly coiffed Gerald, then retreated. She clamped her lips into a hot pink line.

"Very well," she said tightly. "You all think it over and I'll expect a volunteer by next Monday."

Marjorie caught Branigan in the bathroom moments later, her heavy-lidded eyes meeting Branigan's vivid green ones in the mirror. Without a word, the women burst into laughter.

"Friggin' trailers!" Marjorie growled. "Maybe we'll start with mine!"

Branigan laughed harder. Marjorie's mobile home was a firetrap. Books and papers and magazines were piled from the tiny kitchenette at one end to the single bedroom at the other. Her nod to decorating was one poster of Tommy Lee Jones and another of Harrison Ford, a kind of geriatric dorm motif.

Marjorie was not the kind of writer newspaper chains would hire today. She was decidedly un-perky, rude to callers, and downright contemptuous of editors. But she could ferret out information and she could write, two skills that even a management fighting for its life had to respect. She represented the best of old-time newspapering. Marjorie and reporters like her were the reason the folks of Grambling had fought the trends and stuck with their *Rambler* when every other newspaper in the country was in freefall. To a point, at least. Young readers were not signing on, of course. Delivery men could bring them a newspaper and coffee in bed, and they wouldn't read it. They got their news from TV or the Internet like their counterparts nationwide.

But older readers hadn't deserted *The Rambler* as they had many other papers in the South. The Grambling family, for whom the town was named, knew those readers would die out eventually. But they clung to a vision of integrity and purpose – with the occasional toe in the water that was behind Julie's hiring.

The upshot was that Marjorie was pretty much left alone.

"So how is the 'story for Tan' going?"

"Actually, I wasn't making that up," Branigan said, flipping her honey blond hair behind her ears. "He wants a ten-year anniversary piece on the Alberta Resnick murder. It's the only unsolved murder in the city."

"Ah, good story. Anything new on it?"

"Not exactly. But I had an idea I mentioned to him. He bit."

"And it was….?"

"You remember Liam Delaney who used to work here?"

"Sure."

"He's pastor of a homeless mission. Homeless guys. Transients."

Branigan waited for the light to dawn in Marjorie's eyes. "Oh, my gosh, yes. Why didn't we think of that before?"

Branigan washed her hands and didn't answer. She didn't want to go into the reason the homeless were never far from her mind.

Chapter 2

She was jolted awake by a mouse scurrying over her foot, its sharp-clawed feet piercing her thin sock, its naked tail flicking at a bare spot below her pant leg.

In another time, another life, she would have screamed. Now she merely grunted, flipped her foot feebly.

What was a furry rodent compared to last night? Three men, two of them paying enough for four rocks, one paying with a punch to the head. She raised her head gingerly and felt the left side with dirty fingers. Yeah, there was a bump. She hadn't dreamed it. Damon. No, Damien. No, Demetrius, that was it. Demetrius.

"Wha's a white boy doin' wi' a name like De-ME-trius?" she'd slurred, sliding her malt liquor bottle under her backpack, away from his greedy hands. Come to think of it, the question was what had brought on the fist.

He'd talked non-stop during the act. She wasn't expecting love -- that hope was long dead -- but it didn't even feel like sex, really. More like meanness. He'd talked about leaving the *hos-pi-tality* of South Carolina for Hot 'Lanta. But the fool didn't make it to Atlanta. Got off the Greyhound about five towns too early.

Too bad for her.

She sat up, head aching, and peered at the empty bottle of King Cobra. For a moment, she couldn't figure out where she was. Then the light piercing the leaves of a river birch sank into her alcohol-sodden brain. The coolness of the packed red mud registered beneath her aching body. She glanced around at the familiar tents. Those snores belonged to Slim, Malachi, Pete.

She risked a protest from her head by looking up at the girders rising steeply to a slim ledge under the bridge. That's where her paying customers were sleeping off their crack.

She had slept where she fell, on the hardened clay beside the railroad track, a new low even for her. She sobbed once, but it was hoarse and dry. She had no tears left.

No tears, no dignity, no life.

If only she could end it without pain.

If only she could tell what she knew. Maybe someone would pay for that information.

And then as some want, some need, some primal longing stirred deep inside her brain -- the *rep-til-ian* part of her brain, an addiction counselor once told her -- her thoughts shifted. If only, if only … if only, she could find one more rock. One more glorious high, then she would quit.

Once she quit, she would tell everything.

Chapter 3

Malachi Ezekiel Martin finished the grits, scrambled eggs, toast and sausage at St. James African Methodist Episcopal Church, a stately brick building on the block behind *The Rambler* offices. He threw his paper plate and empty coffee cup into a 50-gallon rubber can. Then, without being asked, he tied up the full trash bag and carried it to the parking lot dumpster.

He returned to the church dining hall, grabbed a broom and began sweeping as other homeless men shrugged into their backpacks and walked out. They were engrossed in their own problems, but it was a point of pride for Malachi to "pay" for his meal by cleaning up afterward.

This morning's breakfast manager, a solemn-faced black man with a limp, nodded his thanks. When all the chairs were turned upside down on the tables and the linoleum floor swept and mopped, Malachi shouldered his knapsack and walked into the early June sunshine.

Within moments, he was in front of *The Grambling Rambler's* three-story brick and glass building facing South Main Street. He rounded the building and walked through a side alley to the loading dock. A barrel held newspapers discarded because of a bad print – too faint, bleeding colors, shadowy pictures. He could almost always find the day's edition, and sure enough, there it was: Monday, June 1.

He looked around to make sure no one was watching. The papers were discarded, but still. A man unloading a truck glanced at Malachi, then continued his work, uninterested in what was going on at the recycling barrel.

Malachi wanted to see if the paper had anything further on the hit-and-run of his friend, Vesuvius, five nights before. He'd heard talk in the encampment under the bridge, plenty of talk. *Vesuvius was drunk. Vesuvius had angered some teen-agers who tried to roll him.* And his personal favorite, *Some artists in Atlanta were afraid Vesuvius was encroaching on their territory.*

Malachi shook his head. You had to be careful what you believed out here. More than once he'd heard that one of Grambling's street dudes was dead, only to see him walk into St. James for breakfast a week later. Malachi seriously doubted a resurrection had occurred.

For all the drug-fueled silliness that went on out here, there was an undercurrent of violence, too. *Casual violence*, Pastor Liam at Jericho Road called it. *Casual death*, Malachi silently added.

The newspaper had run three inches the day after Vesuvius's death. Three measly paragraphs. Malachi had seen nothing since. Nothing about an arrest. Nothing about an investigation.

A story that would've made 1A if an upstanding citizen had been the victim was banished to 6B when the victim was a homeless man. Even if, as Malachi suspected, it was something more than Vesuvius being drunk, Vesuvius angering teen-agers.

He folded the paper carefully under his arm and walked back up the alley, looking forward to an hour on a shaded bench, keeping to himself, keeping informed.

Chapter 4

Branigan punched the familiar number into her desk phone, smiling as he answered his own phone.

“Is this Liam Delaney, the pope of Jaw-ja?” she asked.

“Brani G! Haven’t seen you in awhile.”

“I need two things. One, a lunch to catch up. And two, a time to talk to you about a story I’m working on.”

“The hit-and-run?”

“What hit-and-run?”

“One of our homeless men was killed at the corner of Oakley and Anders five nights ago,” Liam said. “That’s not what you wanted?”

“Sorry, but this is the first I’m hearing about it. I’m working on a tenth anniversary piece on the Alberta Resnick murder.”

“Come on over and we’ll negotiate. I can make time this afternoon.”

“Ah, you remember deadlines. I’ll be there at 2 if that’s all right.”

“See you then.”

Branigan left the office at 1:30, leaving herself time to run by Bea’s Bakery to grab bagels and coffee. She figured Liam wouldn’t have taken time to eat. The Main Street bakery smelled deliciously of yeasty, sugary treats and Bea’s to-die-for biscuits, but she virtuously selected two whole grain bagels, no cream cheese. She didn’t let Bea slice them, convinced that slicing kick-started a slide into staleness.

She pulled into Liam’s parking lot with five minutes to spare. She saw his eight-year-old SUV, apparently a requirement for dads of soccer players. Liam was carpool dad times two, with his children Charlie and Chan finishing their senior year at Grambling High East.

Branigan smiled at the names, as she did every time she thought of Liam’s striking offspring. Liam and his wife Liz had no intention of naming their children after the fictional Chinese detective. They named the girl Charlotte after Liam’s great-grandmother, the boy Chandler after a family name they discovered in Liz’s ancestral tree.

Leave it to seventh-graders to get Charlie and Chan out of that. So that’s who they’d been since middle school. Charlie and Chan, the Delaney twins. That’s what most people thought anyway.

But a few family friends knew they weren’t twins at all, but first cousins. Liz was 24 and pregnant with Charlie when Liam’s teen-age sister, well on her way to becoming a heroin addict, turned up pregnant. Shauna Delaney refused to name the father, and threatened to have an abortion. Liam’s parents begged her to reconsider, promising they would care for their grandchild. But it was Liz who finally persuaded the fragile young girl. She and Liam offered to raise the baby as a sibling to their own. Shauna, who worshiped her older brother, consented. Hours after the birth, she relinquished the baby and disappeared from the hospital. Liam’s family hadn’t seen her since.

Since Chan was just six months younger than Charlie, they were in the same grade at school, and most people assumed they were twins. Liam and Liz

certainly made no difference between them, and neither did Liam's grateful parents.

It was not until Chan turned a gangly 12 and began to develop the long muscular legs that would serve him so well running a soccer defense that Branigan had the first inkling of who his father might be. For she had known his father when he was 12.

The homeless shelter showed signs of Liam's five years on the job. It was a Big Box, a sprawling, high-ceilinged, one-level former grocery store. The city had been delighted to get the food store 20 years earlier. But after seven years and profits much lower than its suburban stores, the chain abruptly pulled out, leaving an empty shell and City Council members appalled that their predecessors hadn't ensured an exit penalty.

For six years, the building sat empty, an eyesore and graffiti magnet. Well, empty, if you didn't count its homeless residents who broke in and built fires and left trash piles heavy on whiskey bottles and malt liquor cans. All told, it was a mess that defied the mayor's efforts to attract developers to its promising location, six blocks west of Main Street.

A suburban church interested in inner-city ministry ultimately sought it out as a satellite campus. Such a use wasn't the city's first choice, but Council members figured it was better than an empty storefront. Unfortunately, the newcomers understood little about the lives of the homeless and mentally ill and addicted who lived in proximity to the satellite campus. They went through three pastors in quick succession.

Liam was the fourth, a former *Rambler* reporter and seminary grad, his only experience a single stint as youth minister. He took the struggling mission church as a last-ditch effort by the mother church; the missions committee made it clear they were leaning toward closing it within 18 months.

As Liam told the story, he didn't know enough to understand what would and wouldn't work. He began by looking at the property as a homeowner, wanting to create a more visually welcoming space by breaking up its monotonous asphalt and concrete. He recruited students from his and Branigan's alma mater, Grambling High East, to perform student service hours; they dug up dead grass and planted trees and flower beds. Liam wheedled them to use Student Council funds to buy river birches and Knock-Out roses, tulip bulbs and verbena, geraniums and day lilies. Soon the students and the mission church had an easy partnership that served both well.

Inside, the teen-agers painted an entire interior wall with a colorful mural, peopled with Bible characters. From what Branigan could tell, Adam and Eve were sharing an apple with Daniel as he fought off lions, one of which was saddled and ridden by Joshua entering the land of Canaan, which was peopled by multiple Goliaths fighting off sling-wielding Davids. Liam smiled wryly the first time he showed Branigan the mural. "Exhibit No. 1 on why we need Bible study," he said.

Within a few months, the homeless people who ate breakfast and dinner in the church's soup kitchen and attended its sparse worship services began showing up to garden and clean. Liam was surprised, but instinctively realized their participation was a positive step.

Other churches took note and began sending teams over to learn about homeless ministry. When Liam's 18-month trial period was up, the mission church had its partner high school, 11 partner churches, and had opened the back of the grocery store as an 18-bed homeless shelter for men. Liam contemplated housing women as well, but a trip to a women's shelter in North Carolina convinced him that both genders couldn't be housed in the same building. For now, the shelter remained for men only, though women were welcome for its hot meals.

Branigan shook her head admiringly as she walked past the results the students and homeless men had wrought -- the beginnings of dappled shade, ruby roses and pink geraniums, deep yellow day lilies and golden marigolds. Raised vegetable beds flourished in the field beside the building.

She knew that Liam wasn't everyone's idea of a proper minister. He drank beer at the city's outdoor festivals. He dealt with the homeless with brusque expectations rather than sympathy. He welcomed gays with an outspokenness that didn't always play well in conservative Grambling.

But the Delaneys' roots in Grambling ran deep, and city leaders couldn't argue with Liam's success. He had his admirers as well.

Branigan reached the former grocery's electric doors, which slid open silently. She passed under the sign proclaiming *Jericho Road.* To the side was a folk art painting of multiracial diners sharing a meal: In calligraphy across the bottom were the words "Where the elite eat -- with Jesus."

A man she vaguely recognized greeted her from a desk behind an open receptionist's window, a huge smile splitting his face. "Miz Branigan? You hasn't visit us in awhile."

She searched her mind frantically for a name. Dan? Don? Darren? Liam had taught her the importance of calling names.

"Dontegan!" she said triumphantly, a moment before her misstep would have been obvious. She could see the pleased look on his face and was glad she'd made the effort. "I'm here to see Liam."

"Pastuh told me you was coming," he said. "Go right in."

Liam's office was a boldly colored space, painted lime green and sporting canvases from Jericho's art room. He stood to greet his old friend, his red hair unruly, his face breaking into a welcoming grin. "Hey there!" he said, pulling her into his skinny six-foot frame and grabbing the Bea's bag. Though Branigan was taller than average – five-feet-six, in flats -- she reached only his shoulder. "I've missed you!" he said. "And I've missed lunch."

He rooted around in the bag. "Are you kidding me? Naked bagels? No cream cheese? What's wrong with you, girl?"

"Think of it as an appetizer." She plopped her bagel and coffee on the coffee table that sat between two rocking chairs. He took the rocker with navy cushions, motioning her to take the softer, green-upholstered rocker she loved.

"Despite your unwillingness to feed me adequately, I'm glad you're here," he said. "These guys think no one cares when one of them dies."

Branigan was embarrassed. She wasn't aware one of them *had* died, and reluctantly told Liam so.

“You can make it up to me,” he said. “I’ll help if I can with your murder story, and you write something on the hit-and-run.”

“Deal.” She took a sip of coffee. “You know what I’ve always remembered you saying? Early on you said a man told you the worst part of being homeless wasn’t being cold or wet or hungry. The worst part was being ‘looked right through.’ ”

Liam nodded. “ ‘And we try to look.’ I say that in every speech.”

“That sticks with people. Anyway, tell me about your guy. After I talked to you, I looked it up. All we ran was three inches. I missed it entirely.”

“Well,” he said, “Vesuvius Hightower was killed on his bike where Oakley crosses Anders, there at the library. The driver didn’t stop.” The intersection was three blocks away, between the church shelter and Main Street. “I have no idea what he was doing there. Obviously, he missed our 9 o’clock curfew, so he was going to have to sleep outside. But he had done that before. No big deal.

“Vesuvius was a sweetheart when he was on his meds,” Liam continued. “Very gentle. Child-like. I’m pretty sure he was MR in addition to bi-polar.” Branigan scribbled “mentally retarded,” which was still the official diagnosis, though not the politically correct one. “Mentally challenged” or “mentally disabled” were the terms *The Rambler* used.

“He lived here for eight months,” Liam went on. “Our mental health worker was making progress with him. He was on his meds and about to get permanent housing. But the reason I thought it was a story for you is that his father died the same way five years ago.”

“You’re kidding.”

Liam picked up his phone and punched in three numbers. “Dontegan, can you come to my office for a minute?”

He turned back to Branigan. “Dontegan told me about Vesuvius’s father on the morning we got word about V. It must have happened just weeks before I got here because I didn’t know.”

Dontegan walked through Liam’s open door. “Don-T, can you tell Branigan what you told me about V’s father?”

“V used to ride his bike with his ol’ man,” Dontegan said. “Ever’where. You ain’t never see one ’thout the other. They come to church here way before Pastuh Liam, when nobody else hardly came.

“They stay in that neighborhood ’cross Garner Bridge. One night the ol’ man got on his bike, way late in the middle of the night. They think he was headed to the grocery. He got hit crossin’ the bridge. Car kilt him.”

“Another hit-and-run?” Branigan was amazed at the careless violence this population faced.

“Nah, the woman, she stop,” Dontegan said. “She was all cryin’.”

“Was she charged?”

He shrugged.

“Then how do you know she was crying?”

“Just what I heard.”

She nodded. Armed with Vesuvius Hightower's last name, she could search the paper's archives for confirmation.

Liam took up the story. "A lot of times our guys don't have any family to organize a funeral service. But Vesuvius did. He had aunts, uncles, brothers and sisters. We held his service yesterday. They had honestly tried to help him, I think, but he'd worn them out. That happens a lot with the mentally ill and mentally challenged. Their families don't have resources for the basics, much less mental health care."

Branigan knew this was why Liam had been so determined to hire a mental health counselor as soon as he could raise the money.

"Damn," she said, then repeated a question she'd asked him a dozen times. "Doesn't this work break your heart?"

Liam shrugged, held his palms up. "It probably should. But this stuff comes so fast and so often, it mostly washes right over you." He smiled apologetically. "But I did think the angle of father and son dying the same way was a story that cried out for the Brani G touch. You can talk to Dontegan more if you need to. And anybody else." He finished his bagel and tossed the wax paper into a trashcan as Dontegan left. "V was well liked," Liam added. "He ran the laundry room most weekends."

"Okay," she said, "I'll try to flesh it out with your men and the Hightower family, and have it ready to run Sunday."

Liam picked up his coffee. "Now, how I can I help you?"

"You remember the Resnick murder?"

"Sure." The entire newsroom had been called in on the first few days of the notorious case in July, nearly ten years ago. Alberta Elliott Grambling Resnick, a cousin of Tan's father, had been stabbed to death in the kitchen of her lovely shaded mansion, two blocks off North Main Street. The case was strange, start to finish.

Mrs. Resnick was an elderly widow with two sons and a daughter, all of them well known in historic Grambling. Because the murder occurred over a long July 4 weekend, all the children and grandchildren had been gathered. And given Mrs. Resnick's wealth, all were suspects.

July 4 fell on a Thursday, and the family threw its lavish annual holiday party, followed by the city's fireworks display, easily seen from the front yard. Around 11 p.m., the party broke up. The older son, the daughter and two 13-year-old granddaughters spent the night.

The next day, July 5, there was still plenty of activity at Mrs. Resnick's house. The family members who'd spent the night had breakfast together. The son then took his mother to a doctor's appointment. The daughter dropped the two teens, her nieces, at the Peach Orchard Country Club pool, then returned to the hotel where her husband and sons were staying.

The son dropped Mrs. Resnick at home after her doctor's appointment. She assured him she could fix her own lunch, so he went home. The granddaughters walked back to their grandmother's house in late afternoon, to find her lying on the kitchen floor, stabbed seven times.

Hysterical, the teens ran next door and flagged down a neighbor who was cutting grass. When he could make out the girls' disjointed story, he yelled for his wife to

call police, sent the girls inside his house, and headed over to Mrs. Resnick's. He stayed until police arrived, blue lights spinning, four minutes later.

Because of Mrs. Resnick's standing in the community, because she was a Grambling and because she had a large family, the house filled quickly. Police, the coroner, and City Council members rushed to the scene. Detectives feared the crime scene was being contaminated, but it was hard for officers to keep out their bosses. Only when the police chief arrived three hours later – summoned from Six Flags Over Georgia with his family -- did he crack down on unnecessary personnel and send his bosses home. By then it was too late. Detectives were sure their crime scene had been polluted.

Meanwhile, officers herded family members onto a back porch for interviews. Neighbors brought plates of cookies and coolers filled with soft drinks. One detective Branigan interviewed called it "Southern hospitality run amok."

The Rambler's cop reporter, Jody Manson, was one of the first on the scene, but police kept him and the rest of the media at bay in Mrs. Resnick's driveway. It wasn't a bad vantage point to see family members arriving in twos and threes, some granite-faced, some crumpled and wailing. Jody and two other reporters gathered information at the crime scene while Branigan and the rest of the staff worked from the newsroom, preparing a front-page story about Mrs. Resnick's life and charitable contributions, and another in which Grambling society talked about the loss to the community.

That was day one.

In the confusion of the murder, no one noticed that Mrs. Resnick's car was missing from a detached garage. So the lead story on day two was that the murderer had apparently stolen Mrs. Resnick's 1980 Thunderbird from her garage and abandoned it a mile away in the parking lot of a vacant grocery store – the very lot where Branigan's Honda Civic was now parked outside Jericho Road. Inside the store, three homeless people, squatters, lived without running water or electricity. Police interviewed them repeatedly, but they seemed genuinely bewildered by the whole thing.

On day three, *The Rambler* had another blockbuster: A witness had seen Mrs. Resnick's distinctive gray-green T-bird streaking by early on the afternoon of July 5. The young man laughingly told friends later that day, "She'll have fun, fun, fun 'til her children take her T-bird away." The comment made its way back to neighbors, who told police, who brought the young man in for questioning. He'd been on a bicycle and didn't get a look at the driver, he said. That was why he assumed it was Mrs. Resnick. Police assured him she was dead by then.

For a week, a month, three months, police chased leads, interviewed and re-interviewed family members and neighbors and service providers. Mrs. Resnick's neighbors were understandably nervous and eager to speak with officers. The net was cast broad and wide, for Mrs. Resnick's sons had hired numerous workmen at her home in the weeks preceding the July 4 party. So workers from a fence repair company were interviewed, painters, landscapers. People who were visiting neighbors came under suspicion. In a city with no unsolved murders, this over-the-top stabbing in broad daylight stymied police.

Now as the tenth anniversary neared, the case was on Tan's mind. Which meant it was on Branigan's.

“Tan-4 has asked me to do a piece on Mrs. Resnick’s murder,” she explained, “looking at the investigation and how it could have gone unsolved this long.”

Liam nodded. “There’s still a lot of interest. But how can I help?”

“Well, you remember how every lead fell through on the family members, the workmen she’d had in, the neighbors?”

Liam looked thoughtful for a moment. “Yeah, and remember that stranger living in her pool house? And then coming inside *her* house and playing her piano? Looking back, I’m sure he was mentally ill. At the time, we didn’t know what was going on.”

“Exactly. Once every logical suspect fell through, the police wondered if it wasn’t some transient who killed her, hopped a train, then left.”

“Okay.”

“Who would know better about that population than you?”

Liam’s eyes widened. “Now I see where you’re going.”

“Could you ask around? None of us knew these folks ten years ago. But now you do.”

“I guess so,” Liam said slowly. “But there’s no reason to believe a transient would have returned.”

“I know. It’s a long shot. But I’ve been at the police station for a week, looking through boxes and boxes of files. Believe me, Liam, these guys were committed. They eliminated everyone who had the remotest connection to Alberta Resnick. I’ll be spending most of my time looking over their shoulders and interviewing family members. But what if it *was* a stranger? Someone with no reason – no *sane* reason – to kill her? Someone who just stumbled in during that window of time between her son leaving and her granddaughters returning?”

“We always thought that was a possibility,” Liam said. “Especially with her car left here where homeless people were sneaking in and out. Man, I haven’t thought of that case in years. Probably since I left the paper. That was the last story I worked on.”

“It was?”

“Yeah. I left that August for seminary.”

“Anyway, that’s what I’ll be doing between now and July 5. If any of your guys have memories that go back that far, please ask ’em.”

“Can’t hurt.”

As Branigan rose to leave, her eye fell on a slim table half hidden behind Liam’s desk. He had a new picture of the family – himself tall and freckled, Liz, tiny and olive-skinned beside him. Charlie was her father’s daughter, an inch taller than Branigan, with long, red-gold hair caught in a ponytail, blue eyes laughing in a way dear and familiar. But it was Chan, almost Liam’s height but looking nothing like him, who made Branigan nearly stop breathing.

With his sandy blond hair and tanned skin, the boy looked like neither of his parents. In fact, Chan looked far more like her.

“Have you seen him?” she asked, her voice strained.

“Who?” Liam started idly, then saw where her gaze had landed. “Oh. No. Of course, I’d tell you if I had, Brani.”

She nodded, blinking rapidly to clear her vision. “Great picture of Charlie and Chan,” she said.

She closed the door quietly behind her.

Chapter 5

July 4, ten years ago

Amanda Resnick turned her powder blue Mercedes off North Main, cutting her speed automatically, watching for children to dart into the street. She'd played on these streets as a child and knew how one could lose all sense of danger when chasing a ball or a cat.

She passed a giant magnolia tree, and her mother's elegant, three-story stone house came into view. Her mother's house – that's how she always thought of it, though she'd lived in it herself for 21 years. She and her brothers Ramsey and Heath had built forts under that magnolia, caves really. No sunlight could penetrate its huge branches and flat, glossy leaves.

The spacious front yard was nicely trimmed, she could tell, grass low, shrubbery squared off. *Thank goodness*. Amanda knew what a chore it'd been for Ramsey and Heath to get Mother's permission to let landscapers prepare for this party, to get the iron fence on the side repaired, to have the front porch painted. Or the *ver-an-dah,* as her mother throatily intoned. She also knew they'd had no such luck with the back yard and pool area. Mother had put her foot down, accusing them of trying to sell the house out from under her.

What a pill.

She turned the Mercedes into the driveway, arching oaks overhead making it a dim tunnel. The car purred to the back of the house, where the driveway widened into a slate expanse large enough to hold six cars. On one side was a detached three-car garage, wooden, painted white. On the other side of the parking pad was the house itself, with a simple white door breaking up its flat stone face, wood on the bottom, six glass panes on top.

Beyond the parking surface, the path to the pool was barely visible through the wildly growing hedge. Little had changed since she last lived here, 24 years before.

Amanda sighed, and rummaged in her bag for the key she used once a year.

"Mother," she called, knocking and turning the key simultaneously. Dollie, her mother's Chihuahua, walked to the door and yipped twice. Seeing it was Amanda, she turned and waddled back to her pillow in the laundry room. Amanda stepped into the kitchen, dim, like the driveway, and dated, its yellow and brown wallpaper hideous. The cupboards, once gleaming white, were faded and yellowed. *Depressing,* Amanda thought, *and unnecessary*. The house was once a showplace, and could be again if Mother would let go of a few dollars.

At least it was clean, she could tell, sniffing pine-scented floor cleaner. Tabitha had seen to that.

She walked through the kitchen into the spacious dining room, set up for tonight's party. Through an arch was the living room – or *par-lah,* according to her mother -- with its handsome hardwood floors, cabbage rose rug and gleaming black grand piano. The formal rooms, at least, retained their grandeur. She found her mother, seated at the silent piano.

"Hello, Mother," she said formally.

Alberta Resnick, regal even in gray slacks, paisley blouse and black ballet flats, raised her head with a start. “Amanda. I didn’t hear you come in.”

Amanda came forward and hugged her mother, stiffly.

“Where are your boys?”

“By the hotel pool by now, I imagine.”

“But they’ll be here tonight?”

“Of course.”

“I … I … need to tell you something, Amanda. Before everyone arrives.”

“Okay.” She settled into an armchair. “We’ve got hours before the party.”

“You heard about that man who came in the house last month, the one I caught playing the piano?”

Amanda laughed. Her brother had shared the bizarre story about a mentally ill homeless man who had set up residence in the pool house, then had dared come into the main house. “Ramsey said you gave him what-for.”

Alberta Resnick didn’t join her daughter’s laughter. In fact, she looked at her a long moment. Finally, Amanda said, “I’m sorry, Mother. It wasn’t funny. It was sad, or even scary, I suppose. But it was so like you. Eighty years old and not afraid of a stranger in your house.”

“And I’m not afraid now,” her mother continued. “I’m … wary, I guess you could say.” Then abruptly, “I think Heath was behind it.”

“Behind what?” asked Amanda, bewildered by her mother’s sudden shift.

Alberta gazed at her steadily.

“Behind the crazy man playing your piano?”

Her mother nodded.

“Mother, that makes no sense. Ramsey said the guy was mentally ill and thought he lived in your pool house. What could Heath possibly have to do with that?”

“Heath wants me to sell the house,” Alberta said stubbornly. “He’s been after me to cut the shrubbery and list the house. When nothing was working, I think he tried to scare me out.”

Amanda’s lips parted, but no words came. She stared at her mother. Finally, she got her thoughts together. “Heath? Mother? Do you hear yourself? No offense, but you’re 80 years old. Heath has money of his own. What possible reason could he have for wanting to sell your dam…. to sell your house a few years early?”

“He is,” Alberta said with finality. “And I want to cut him out of my will. Tomorrow. I want you to take me to my attorney’s office tomorrow.”

Amanda breathed out noisily, already exasperated after two minutes with her mother. *Why couldn’t the old lady go quietly?*

“Mother, I don’t think this is right. I’m going to have to think about it.”

“Think about it, and let me know tonight,” her mother said, effectively dismissing her.

Amanda sat for another moment, but it was clear she had lost her mother's attention. *As always*. She rose with a silent shake of her head and walked toward the kitchen, heels ticking on the hardwood, then less stridently, on the linoleum. She let herself out the kitchen door, checking to make sure she locked it behind her. She was puzzling over her mother's request, but puzzling, too, over something else. Something she couldn't quite put her finger on. Her mother was as aggravating as ever, but something was a little off.

Amanda didn't want to get in the middle of her mother's war with her younger brother. She'd distanced herself from her family, and that's how she liked it. She'd made a life with Bennett and their sons, and now she wanted nothing more than to find her husband and get his take on her mother's request. He would know what to do.

She was so engrossed in her thoughts, in finding Bennett and sharing this latest weirdness in her family, that she didn't glance toward the hedges that blocked the pool.

Even if she had, she wouldn't have seen someone crouching, watching, so thick was the tangle.

Chapter 6

She was hungry. When was the last time she ate? She searched her mind, but couldn't come up with an answer. She squinted from the shade of the bridge to an abandoned warehouse. The trees in between were casting almost no shadows, so it must be mid-day. Lunch time. She'd had no breakfast, obviously. No supper last night. Come to think of it, no lunch yesterday either.

Her mind couldn't go back further than that. Maybe she'd had breakfast yesterday at that ol' mission church that looked like a grocery store, where they let men live but not women. What the heck was up with that? Everybody would tell you the streets were harder on a woman.

Maybe she'd go back there. There were all kind of do-gooders around that place who would give you pop-tops and crackers if it wasn't time for a meal. 'Specially if you could find a time that Pastor Liam wasn't around. He'd want to talk about re-hab. You'd think re-hab was the gospel itself to hear that freckled freak go on about it.

She sat up and unzipped the dirty backpack she was using for a pillow. Was there a little something in there to get her going? Her hands grasped a bottle, but when she pulled it out, it was empty. And worse: A brown spider came with it and went scurrying up her arm. She flailed wildly, a screech erupting from her parched throat.

A head popped through the flap of the tent closest to her. "You all right, hon?" asked a heavyset woman, her head wrapped in a blue kerchief. She nodded mutely, suddenly scared that she might be heard by Demetrius. She wanted to stay as far away from his swatting hands as she could get. She glanced around the campsite, but no one else was paying attention.

At the far end of the shaded area, a small fire was going with a grill rack propped on rocks, and a battered coffee pot on top. Two men, one black, one white, were avoiding its heat, trying to bring days-old coffee to a boil.

Her neighbor was chatty. "Elise and Slick got arrested last night," she said, with a nod up the concrete incline to the plywood shack under the bridge's girders. Perched on no more than four feet of concrete ledge, it was tucked directly beneath the roadway. She blearily wondered how the builder had gotten the large plyboards up the incline without tumbling off.

"I bet you could use it while they's gone."

Now her neighbor had her attention. "You think?" she said.

"Ain't no one else up there."

She thought for a moment. The shack had a door she could peer out, and even a roughly cut window, covered in plastic. From high atop this tent city, she could see Demetrius coming. Or the steep incline might keep him away altogether.

"I thank you," she told her neighbor formally. She grabbed her backpack and her grimy tennis shoes, and made her way, crab-like, up the concrete to her new home.

Maybe she'd get even luckier. Maybe old Elise and Slick had squirreled away a rock she could fire up.