



BREAKER'S REEF

By Terri Blackstock

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Chapter One

Chief Matthew Cade rarely considered another line of work, but the four-thirty a.m. phone call about the dead teenaged girl made him long for a job as an accountant or electrician—some benign vocation that didn't require him to look into the eyes of grieving parents. He sat on the side of his bed, rubbing his eyes as he clutched the phone to his ear.

“She's from Cape Refuge, Chief.” Myrtle, his night shift dispatcher, sounded shaken.

“That new guy, Scott Crown, just found her floating in a boat on the Tybee side of the river. Looks like a homicide.”

Cade braced himself. “Who is it, Myrtle?”

“Didn't give me a name yet. If they know it, they're keeping it off the radio for now. But Chief Grant from Tybee is hot about how Crown handled things and he wanted you to come to the scene as soon as you can.”

“All right, give me the address.” Oswald, Cade's cat, jumped onto his lap, purring for attention as Cade fumbled for a pen and jotted the address down. The cat stepped onto the bed table and plopped down on the notepad. “So what is it Crown did?”

“I'm not clear on that, Chief. But he's young. Go easy on him.”

He clicked the phone off and thought about the nineteen-year-old rookie. Crown joined the force straight out of the Academy; he hadn't even been in Cade's department a week. His zeal to be the best cop in the department had led to a few mishaps already, but nothing serious.

Cade knew he just needed to give the kid some time to grow into his position. But what had he done to aggravate the neighboring chief?

He got up, wincing at the arthritic ache he always felt in his leg first thing in the morning.

It had healed from the multiple fractures he'd sustained in an injury a year ago--and he'd overcome his limp for the most part--but the mornings always reminded him how far he'd come.

He got dressed and hurried out to his car. It was cool for May, but he knew it would warm up to the upper eighties by the end of the day. Life would go on as it always did—murder or not. As he drove across the bridge that connected Cape Refuge to Tybee Island, his mind raced with the faces of teenaged girls who'd grown up here. Whoever this girl was, the murder would have a rippling effect, shattering her family and shaking her friends. There would be a life-sized hole in the heart of the small town.

He found the site and pulled up to the squad cars parked there. One of the Tybee officers met him as he got out. “Oh, it’s you, Chief Cade. I didn’t recognize you in your truck.”

“Where’s Chief Grant?” he asked.

The man pointed to the riverbank, and Cade saw him with the medical examiner looking over the body.

As he approached, Cade saw the girl lying on the grass. She was small, maybe a hundred pounds, and looked as if someone had laid her down there, her arms out from her body, her knees together and bent to the side. In the flickering blue light, he couldn’t yet see her face, and her hair was wet, long . . . He walked closer, and Keith Parker, the medical examiner, looked up at him. “Hey, Cade. You recognize her?”

Chief Grant handed him a flashlight, and Cade stooped down and illuminated her face.

His heart plunged. She was Alan Lawrence’s girl, Emily. She couldn’t be more than fifteen.

Cade didn’t think she’d even gotten her license yet.

Anger stung his eyes, and he rubbed his jaw. His throat was tight as he swallowed. Who could have done this? Who would have wanted to end the life of an innocent, sweet girl whose parents loved her?

“Yeah, her name’s Emily Lawrence. Her parents are Alan and Marie.” He paused, trying to steady his voice. “You know the cause of death?”

“Gunshot,” Grant said. “She was shot in another location, then apparently brought here and put into that boat. Your man found her.”

Cade stood and looked the direction Grant nodded. Scott Crown stood with the other cops, answering questions. His uniform was wet, and he looked shaken and nervous. Cade felt sorry for the kid. Odds were he hadn't expected to find a dead girl his first week on the job.

"Unfortunately," the Tybee chief went on, "your man compromised the evidence. Moved the body out of the boat before he called us. Got her wet trying to get her onto the shore. Who knows what evidence might have been washed off? I would think you'd train your people better than that."

Cade's anger shifted from the faceless killer to the rookie. "What was he even doing over here? He was supposed to be patrolling Cape Refuge."

"He saw the boat floating in the river between the two islands, saw that someone was in it. Right then he should have called my department instead of coming onto my turf and handling the matter himself."

Cade sighed and looked toward the kid again. He'd had reservations about hiring someone so young right out of the academy, but Crown was Joe McCormick's nephew. When his detective vouched for the kid, Cade decided to give him the benefit of the doubt. But he'd recognized Crown's hero complex his first day on the job. He was something of a loose cannon, and Cade had wondered if he could trust him to follow the rules.

Apparently, he couldn't.

He crossed the grass toward Crown. The kid turned, saw him, and burst into his explanation. "Chief, I know I did wrong. It was stupid. I don't even know what I was thinking.

But there were vultures, and I thought there must be a dead animal in the boat . . . I crossed the bridge and came over here . . ."

"Your first mistake," Cade said.

"But if I hadn't, they might not have found her!"

"Crown, if you had called Tybee to tell them what you saw, they would have been there in minutes. Not only did you step outside of our jurisdiction, but you botched up the evidence."

The kid looked at the cops around him, as if humiliated that he'd been reamed in front of them. "I didn't botch it up."

"Yes, you did! I *know* they taught you in the Academy never to move a body. And then you go and wash off the evidence—!"

In the light of the police cars' headlights, he could see the kid's face turning red. "Okay, I'm sorry! I got out to the boat and recognized the girl. I wasn't sure she was dead. I was trying to *save* her!"

"You should have checked before you got her out of the boat!"

"Right." Crown's voice rose as he shot back. "So let me get this straight. Next time I see a girl dying in a boat, I'm supposed to sit on my hands until the right people get there? I thought we were emergency personnel. I thought it was our job to *save* lives!"

Crown was livid, stepping over his bounds. Clearly, Cade wasn't going to teach him anything right here in front of his peers. Besides, there was a dead girl lying there—and a killer to be identified. He didn't have time to deal with the rookie.

"Go back to the station, Crown. Wait for me there."

"I don't *want* to go back. *I* found her!"

Cade stepped nose to nose with the kid, speaking through his teeth. "Now, Crown. If I hear one more word, you're fired."

Crown backed down then, and without another word, stormed off to his car. Cade watched him until he drove away, then breathed a frustrated sigh and turned back to the body.

Emily. He remembered watching her at the Hanover House Easter egg hunt when she was three. She'd practically tripped over the "hidden" eggs and celebrated when she found her first one, while those around her snatched up all the rest. Who would want her dead?

He went back to his car and radioed in. "Chief Cade here. Get all available units to secure the bank of the Bull River across from where the body was found. I don't want anyone traipsing through there until I have a chance to get over there. We don't know which side the boat was put in on."

The radio crackled, and Myrtle's voice rasped across the air waves. "Will do, Chief." As she began radioing the other cars on duty, he went back to the body and stooped down next to the medical examiner. "Where's the gunshot wound, Keith?"

The ME pointed to the hole in her stomach. "No exit wound, so it probably didn't happen at close range. The bullet's still in there. But she was shot hours ago. Bled out before she was put into the boat."

Cade stood, a sick feeling twisting in his gut as he anticipated having to go to her home and break the news to her parents. They might not even know she was missing yet. If they'd gone to bed before her curfew, they wouldn't know until morning. But if they were more diligent, as he knew Alan was, they might be up even now, waiting to confront her when she came in.

In a million years, they would never expect news like this.

He wished he was in charge of the investigation, but the murder hadn't happened on his turf. Still, he looked over the body as the medical examiner knelt beside her.

"That a bruise on her jaw?" Cade asked

"Yep. Several more on her arms and legs. There was definitely a struggle. And look at this." He pointed to the chafed skin around her mouth. "Looks like duct tape was pulled off of her mouth and wrists."

It had clearly been an abduction. Cade looked across the dark water. Was there a murderer still lurking on his island, looking for young girls?

"We need to notify the family, Cade."

He turned to Grant. "I'll do it. They're friends of mine."

"I'm waiting for the GBI to get here. I'll need their help on this."

Cade knew the GBI, Georgia's Bureau of Investigation, had the resources to solve this case. He was glad they'd been notified so early.

"One of our detectives is going to need to go through her room, see what we can find,"

Grant said. "If you can just break the news to the parents, then my detective or the state's men can take it from there."

Right. Let me do the dirty work, then be on my way. "That's fine. I'll seal off her room, make sure nobody goes in there."

He strode back to his truck, trying to get his head together. How was he going to break it to them? The muscles in the back of his neck were rock hard, and his jaw hurt as he ground his teeth together. What would he say? How would he phrase it?

Lord, give me the words.

As he drove his pick-up back to Cape Refuge, Cade rehearsed the hated speech in his mind. *Alan and Marie, I'm afraid I have some bad news . . .*

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