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“*Circle of Vengeance*, Ramona Richards’s second book in the Star Cavanaugh Cold Case series, was impossible to put down—I stayed up until one a.m. to finish it. Anxiously awaiting the next one.”

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CIRCLE OF
VENGEANCE

Books in the Star Cavanaugh Cold Case Series

Burying Daisy Doe

Circle of Vengeance

A STAR CAVANAUGH COLD CASE
.....

CIRCLE OF VENGEANCE

RAMONA RICHARDS



KREGEL
PUBLICATIONS

Circle of Vengeance

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Published by Kregel Publications, a division of Kregel Inc., 2450 Oak Industrial Dr. NE, Grand Rapids, MI 49505. www.kregel.com.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Richards, Ramona, 1957- author.

Title: Circle of vengeance / Ramona Richards.

Description: Grand Rapids, MI : Kregel Publications, [2022] | Series: A Star Cavanaugh Cold Case ; 2

Identifiers: LCCN 2022008684 (print) | LCCN 2022008685 (ebook) | ISBN 9780825447471 (paperback) | ISBN 9780825478628 (epub) | ISBN 9780825469596 (kindle)

Classification: LCC PS3618.I3438 C57 2022 (print) | LCC PS3618.I3438 (ebook) | DDC 813/.6--dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022008684>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022008685>

ISBN 978-0-8254-4747-1, print

ISBN 978-0-8254-7862-8, epub

ISBN 978-0-8254-6959-6, Kindle

Printed in the United States of America

22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 / 5 4 3 2 1

For Julie,
for never giving up, no matter what

CHAPTER ONE

Sunday, May 14, 1995

Lake Martin, Alabama

THE LITTLEST GIRL squealed, the high-pitched sound rocketing over the water to the twenty-foot walkabout boat anchored less than a hundred yards offshore. Beneath the bow bimini top near the front, two sets of binoculars popped up as Lee and his uncle Chase observed the Marshall clan at play. The extended family of Edmund and Margery Marshall scattered across the long sloping lawn that reached from the lake's edge to the sprawling family compound on the hill above. The boat had drifted closer to shore from when Lee and Chase had first anchored, but it was only one of a dozen or so floating in the fish-filled inlet near the Marshall compound. They were, as Chase had said, "Hiding in plain sight."

On the grassy shore, three generations of the affluent Marshalls had gathered for a leisurely picnic on this quiet Sunday—the patriarch and his wife who had worked to make the wealth, the three children who were helping build it, and the grandchildren who would never have to worry about it. Those grandchildren dashed about between the two Marshall brothers, who tried to toss a football back and forth without tripping over one of their offspring. The tallest of the cousins—a boy not yet a teen—was clearly torn between joining his father and uncle and continuing to torment the younger ones with a lizard he'd caught.

Lee lowered his binoculars and slumped in the front passenger chair of the boat, bored as only a seventeen-year-old boy can be. The

promised excitement of following his uncle, a private detective, around on one of his jobs had sounded thrilling. Instead, they had watched as the little girl and her cousins—all under twelve—scampered about in a game of tag for almost an hour.

“Tell me again why we are watching a bunch of rich white folks without a care in the world.” Lee had a hard time keeping the envy out of his voice. He didn’t care. He could list a dozen things he’d rather be doing.

His uncle took a long breath, a sign of his growing impatience. Sitting behind the wheel of the boat, he twisted, glaring at Lee. “I told you. Background. You see the little girl, the youngest, in the *Little Mermaid* T-shirt.”

Lee peered through the binoculars again. “Yeah. The one who looks about five?”

“Yes. Just turned. Today is her birthday. Her name is Hope. She belongs to the youngest of the Marshall kids, the strawberry-blond studying on the blanket.”

Lee lowered his binoculars to study his uncle, the sharp angles of the man’s face, the crinkled skin of a rough scar that peeked from beneath the collar of his polo shirt. “That blond looks like she’s my age. She can’t be more than seventeen.”

“Eighteen. Just enrolled at UAB.”

Lee took another look. He couldn’t believe the blond was old enough to be enrolled in the University of Alabama at Birmingham, much less—“And she’s got a five-year-old?”

Chase lowered his binoculars. “Yes. What of it?”

The tone in his uncle’s voice did not invite an answer to the question. “Nothing. Just unusual, that’s all.”

Chase lifted the binoculars. “Gen—the woman—isn’t involved with the girl’s father, but he likes to keep an eye out. And Gen’s started dating a new guy she met at UAB. Daddy doesn’t like it. Wants to know what’s going on.”

“So he hired you to keep an eye out?”

“It’s what I do.”

Right. The ink on Chase’s new license as a private investigator had barely had time to dry. “Is the new guy here?”

“Not so far.”

Lee raised the binoculars one more time, trying to take in the entire scene. The old man—obviously the eldest Marshall—stood at the grill with a soda in one hand, flipping burgers, hot dogs, and steaks. His wife spread plates and flatware on the picnic table, anchoring a stack of napkins with the ketchup bottle. Two dark-haired young women, probably the brothers’ wives, tried to help the older woman, without much success. The kids continued to race about the long lawn that sloped down to the shimmering lake and the Marshall boathouse and dock, making enough racket to wake the dead.

Serene. Happy. The very picture of the American dream.

As they watched, a tall man carrying a cake box emerged from the main house, his long strides carrying him closer to the Marshalls. Spotting him, Gen bounced off her blanket, the books she’d been studying scattering over it. She ran to the man, greeting him with a generous hug and a kiss on the cheek as he struggled to keep the cake box level. Gen’s pale complexion and reddish-blond locks made for a sharp contrast to the man’s dark skin and hair.

“That’s the new guy?”

“Yes. Nicholas Eaton.” Chase’s teeth ground together, the gritting sound making Lee wince.

Eaton? Lee lowered the binoculars again. “Like the hotel-chain guys? Those Eatons?”

His uncle’s voice was tight. “Yes. Oldest son. At UAB working on his MBA.”

“I guess rich attracts rich.”

Chase jerked the binoculars away from his eyes, his face a twisted mask of anger. “It’s not about the money.”

Lee scooted back against the hull, trying to move out of range of his uncle’s ire. He pushed his dark hair off his forehead. “Of course not.”

“He does not want his little girl raised by a”—Chase stopped, swallowing whatever he had been about to say—“a stranger.”

“So now what?”

“Now I gather the info, and we wait.”

“For what?”

CIRCLE OF VENGEANCE

Chase returned to watching the idyllic scene through the binoculars. “For the right time.”

Lee dropped it. He wasn’t sure he wanted to know the next answer—the right time for *what?* He too continued watching the Marshalls. Eaton and Gen had settled back on the blanket, their heads together as they studied one of her books. The oldest cousin had given up on the lizard and had joined in the football toss. The old man had loaded a platter with meat as his wife rounded up the family.

Lee rolled his shoulders. The tension radiating off his uncle made him nervous, fidgety. He’d been eager to come along, to learn more about his uncle’s new private investigation business. It had sounded exciting, like one of those adventure movies he loved. But this . . . was not that. He knew Chase had not told him the whole story. He also knew that if Chase had anything to do with this, that family was about to have their rich-people peacefulness turned topsy-turvy. And Lee didn’t want to have anything to do with that.

But he had a bad feeling he was in it for the long haul.

CHAPTER TWO

Present Day

Pineville, Alabama

JILL TURNEY FIDGETED. I waited for her answer, trying not to watch her foot. Jill sat, legs crossed, on a bistro stool at the front of my Overlander, the Airstream travel trailer that was my temporary home and office. Professional, polished, and poised, a lawyer in her prime. Her dark hair remained in a neat, tight French braid, but her floral-embroidered Kate Spade boot bounced like an impatient child in church, making her entire body tremble. Her fingers twisted the strap of the matching handbag, which she clutched in her lap.

We had met a few weeks ago, and now Jill had finally decided to hire me. When she had made that announcement a few minutes ago, I asked one direct question. “What do you want me to do?”

“Isn’t it obvious?”

“No. Tell me what you want me to do.”

She couldn’t answer. Her foot gyrations increased in strength, and the Overlander rocked. *Hmm*. I obviously needed to check the stabilizers underneath. I had, after all, recently had an issue with a local raccoon who liked the underside of my trailer. The cooler temps of autumn had made him braver, enough so that he’d already tangled once with Cletis, the orange campground tabby. That had been a fight to raise the dead. It definitely had dragged me out of bed at two in the morning. Cletis had won, but I’d had to wrangle him to the vet for stitches.

I sighed and sat down on the edge of the recliner, which was on the opposite side of the trailer’s living room from the bistro stool. “Look,

CIRCLE OF VENGEANCE

Jill, you've been gone from Pineville a long time. I know this thing has plagued your family—"

The foot froze. "This thing?" Her voice rose in pitch. "This *thing*? You mean the murdered woman found in Daddy's barn? The murder they tried so hard to blame on Daddy that it ruined all our lives? You mean that *thing*?"

Well . . . yes. Finding a dead body on someone's property does tend to affect how people view folks.

"Jill—"

"Ricky's been arrested. Again."

Ab. Jill's brother. Twelve years her senior, Ricky Turney was as well known to local law enforcement officials as Otis was to Sheriff Andy Taylor in good old Mayberry. And for similar reasons.

"Your parents called you."

Jill nodded, a short, clipped snap of the head. "They don't have the bail money, so of course they called me. They don't even know how much it'll be this time, since it's not exactly his first offense. He won't be arraigned until tomorrow, and I'm tempted to leave him there to rot." She uncrossed her legs and clamped both feet on the floor. "I am *so* tired of this, Star! It has to stop. Now!"

"Um, rehab—"

She waved away the suggestion before I could get it out. "No good. He won't go, or if he does go, he won't stay. He's going to kill himself, or even worse, someone else."

"He drives while under the—"

"Of course he drives! Mama can't stop him, and Daddy won't. Daddy would personally love it if Ricky took out half the county. But it's not even really the booze, you know?"

"How so?"

"It's that woman! She ruined my family, and she's going to get my brother killed! Even my own psychiatrist tells me that Ricky and I will never be normal as long as that's hanging over our heads. The 'root cause,' she called it. Root of all our evil."

"You see a psychiatrist?"

“Star!”

I straightened. “You have to say it, Jill. I’m not a mind reader. You and Ricky have toyed with this since I got to Pineville. Since Mike introduced us and you found out I was a private investigator. But I can’t ask. And I cannot assume. You have to tell me, tell me exactly what you want from me.”

She sat completely still, staring down at her hands. “You know I work with investigators every day. This shouldn’t be so hard.”

“That’s work. This is family.”

She closed her eyes. “Yes. You understand. Family is different.”

Boy howdy, was that an understatement. I’d arrived in Pineville earlier this year in an attempt to solve my own family cold case. It had almost gotten me killed because my judgment had been clouded by family intrigue. And I’d left this small Alabama town, planning to resume my former life in Nashville, only to return for another case. Then another. That I’d ended up staying in Pineville longer than I had planned astonished a lot of people. Including me.

Part of the reason I had lingered now sat in front of me, trying to finally work up the nerve to say the words she’d hinted at for several months. I’d met Jill when the local chief of police, Michael Luinetti, had introduced us not long after my first case was resolved back in the spring. She’d been in town only for a short stay, during one of her many trips home to bail out her brother. I’d met Ricky as well, although he wasn’t coherent at the time. He referred to Jill as “the one who got away,” meaning she’d escaped small-town Alabama for the lights and corporate world of Chicago. The story they told me about the unsolved crime on their family farm riveted me, so I embraced the idea of working with them. But Jill had to be specific with what she wanted me to do.

Jill took a deep breath and finally spoke, her voice still carrying the twang of her north Alabama roots. Law school and four years in Chicago had dimmed it not one whit. “I want to hire you to solve the murder of Genevieve Marshall Eaton. I want you to find out who really killed her and clear my family’s name of this curse.”



Michael Luinetti looked up from his computer, his face calm, his dark-blue eyes flat. This was a rare event. The German side of his blood usually lost out to the Sicilian side when it came to his expressions. “You want what?” Even his voice remained level, if disbelieving.

I leaned against the doorframe of his office, using my foot to push the windowed door labeled “Chief of Police” farther open. “I was wondering if you could share anything your department has on the murder of Genevieve Eaton. I understand it’s still an open case.”

He blinked, and I could almost see the investigator part of his brain tumbling the request over a few times. I waited, knowing he’d put it together. I usually brainstorm out loud. Mike prefers to remain silent as the facts click into place in his brain.

Mike and I have, as they say, history. That we spend a lot of time together is regular fodder for the local gossip mill. It makes us a good team and comfortable partners with our work. And good friends.

Well, OK, we’re more than friends. We just try not to be too obvious about that part of our relationship while I’m standing in his office discussing dead bodies.

One eyebrow arched. His tell. He had it. “Jill Turney has finally hired you to clear her father.”

“Yep.”

“You are never getting back to Nashville. You know that, right?”

This had become a running joke between us. After solving the cold-case murders of my father and grandmother last year, I’d returned to Nashville to heal and recoup. I had to come back to Alabama to retrieve the Overlander my grandmother had given me. Mike had immediately introduced me to two potential clients, his not-so-subtle attempts to get me to stay in Pineville. But I’d hauled the Overlander back to Nashville, parked it in the backyard of my cottage there, and refitted part of it as a portable investigation unit, complete with some basic forensic equipment. I’d barely gotten the refit completed when I had a request for help on another Pineville cold case. After a second request, I finally rented a slot at a nearby RV campground. I’d only been back to

Nashville twice in the last six months to check on my house. Both times I'd left the Overlander in Pineville. Now Jill Turney had finally made up her mind, and it looked like maybe I'd be staying a little longer.

"I have to go back soon to prep the house for winter." I'd hired a house sitter, a friend who was temporarily out of work, but it wasn't a long-term solution.

"Or you could just rent it for a year." A suggestion Mike had made a few dozen times. He didn't want me to leave Pineville. And to be honest, despite all the work he'd sent my way, this dark-haired Yankee was the primary reason I hadn't left.

History.

This time, however, his words felt different. Almost like a warning. I moved closer to his desk. "You believe this will take a while." The previous two were relatively recent cases and turned out to be quick to resolve. Still . . . "My father was murdered in 1984. My grandmother in 1954. Those were cold a pretty long time."

"Yes, but your father and grandmother were murdered as part of an ongoing conspiracy of corruption, and their deaths were never investigated. Gen Eaton's murder was under a new sheriff and was investigated thoroughly. Not closed, but they weren't negligent. Just a lot of dead ends. It's been cold since 1999. It also happened before the town and the county split and Pineville became a municipality with a police chief. The files used to be in the combined archives, but I wouldn't swear to it now."

"So I'm wasting my time?"

He shrugged. "And possibly Jill's money. I know that case. I went through all the cold-case files when I was first hired five years ago, and Jill asked me to specifically take a close look at that one. It's been re-examined twice, but the detectives couldn't find a new angle. Everything led to the same place as before—right to Kevin Turney's doorstep. They did a good job, but they couldn't find anything that could either clear or convict her father. While technically the case is open, everyone who's looked at it thinks it's unsolvable."

"So if her father is guilty, he did a masterful cleanup."

"But if he's innocent, someone did a lousy job of framing him."

CIRCLE OF VENGEANCE

“No one said it would be easy.”

Mike finally smiled. “If it was, it wouldn’t hold your interest.”

“I do like a challenge.”

Mike opened a drawer and pulled out a sheet of paper. “Have Jill fill out this request form. She can ask for the files as a family member involved with the case. Have her send it back with a note appointing you as the agent for the family.”

I took the form and glanced over it. Standard stuff. “This is awfully . . . official.”

A smile flashed across his face, then he smothered it. “We have a new mayor. I like my job.”

“Ah.” I folded the paper and slipped it into my purse. I leaned one hip against his desk. “And I kinda like you having this job.”

“I always knew you just liked me for my money.”

“I do prefer a man who has big bucks.”

This time his smile lingered. Another running joke. Mike made less than I had as a beat cop in Nashville. Small town, small budget. I leaned closer. “So what can *you* tell me about the Turneys? Not as police chief. Just as Michael Luinetti, observer of Pineville.”

“You know the two are pretty much the same.”

I shrugged.

Mike pushed away from his computer and nodded at the door. Ah. Back to business. I walked over and closed the door, then sat in one of his 1960s-style visitor chairs.

He leaned his forearms on the desk. “Kevin Turney moved here in the late seventies, kind of a late-blooming hippie type, want-to-live-off-the-grid sort of guy. Nice fella at the time, from all reports. He bought the land, built the house, barn, all the outbuildings. Not sure where he met Willa, but they married in the mid-eighties. Ricky came along. They wanted to have a bunch of kids, their own commune. But if I remember correctly, Willa had trouble having children, so after a few years, they adopted Jill. The farm flourished.”

“And everybody was happy.”

Mike nodded. “Until one of Kevin’s transient workers discovered loose earth in one of the stalls and uncovered a hand.”

“Everything went south.”

“Yep. That was about 1998 or 1999. Genevieve Marshall Eaton had been missing for about a year.”

“Kidnapped? Runaway wife?”

“At first they suspected runaway. Her marriage had seemed sound, but there had been some odd behaviors, missing cash, strange phone calls. But no signs of foul play.”

“But . . .”

“Nicholas Eaton insisted that his wife would never do that, never leave him. He’s an interesting character. New money, family is in the hospitality business. Has been since the early sixties. Started with one motel and built or bought into hotel chains. He has a dignified, regal presence and is quite no-nonsense. He’d met Gen in college and described her as kind, intelligent, meticulous, and straightforward. Not a subtle or submissive woman. Not given to sneaking around. If she’d wanted a divorce, she would have confronted him with the problems long before it came to the breaking point. The one twist in the case is that something similar had already happened to them.”

I leaned toward his desk. “What do you mean?”

“Gen had a little girl, Hope, the result of an assault when she was only twelve or thirteen. Eaton planned to adopt her, but Hope was kidnapped before they married. She was never located. So Eaton did not take well to the suggestion that Gen had brought this on herself. They already had known tragedy and had stuck together. And to all reports, they were a loving couple, quite devoted to each other, despite all they had been through.”

“Who attacked Gen?”

Mike shook his head. “No one knew.” He paused and shrugged one shoulder. “At least, no one who would talk to the authorities. After a few weeks, the family stopped cooperating, and their attorney simply told the police that Gen needed to heal.”

The pieces slipped together in my head. “They found out she was pregnant.”

“That was the gossip of the day. They sent her to family in North Carolina for the next few months—”

CIRCLE OF VENGEANCE

“More healing.”

His mouth jerked. “Yes.”

“And she came back with Hope.”

“Yep. And Gen disappeared into the Marshall family compound on Lake Martin for a while. Homeschooled.”

“So neither case was resolved?”

“Birmingham cops couldn’t get anywhere. Eaton hired a PI, who found no trace of Hope but tracked Gen as far as Trussville, then lost the trail. Nothing until she turned up in Kevin Turney’s barn.”

“Cause of death?”

“Gunshot to the head. Entrance in the front. The wound was clean, small caliber, but she’d been in the muck too long. Not much left of her face. Dental records inconclusive. Too decomposed for fingerprints.”

“Forensics?”

“She was buried in a stall that had once held cows but was being used to store hay. It was a forensics tornado before they ever started digging. Toxic is a mild description.”

“So . . . DNA for identification.”

Another nod. “And her wedding set.”

“You mean her rings?”

“Yep. Very distinctive. Nicholas had them custom made. Their matching wedding bands were black onyx trimmed on both edges in gold. Last I heard, he still wears his. Never remarried. Gen’s engagement ring was a five-carat black diamond surrounded by smaller white diamonds.”

My eyes widened. “And the killer left them on her hand?”

“The murder definitely wasn’t about money. Or the fact that Mr. and Mrs. Nicholas Eaton were one of the wealthiest couples in Birmingham. It also could have been expediency. There’s not a pawnbroker or fence in the state who would not have recognized those rings.”

“So maybe not a kidnapping.”

“Not for money, at any rate. Nicholas identified the rings and provided the DNA sample. The results took a while. In the meantime, rumors flew like crazy, and the Turneys got the worst of it. No one could accept an explanation that didn’t lay the blame at their feet. Some of

the local stores wouldn't sell to them. They stopped answering the door. Ricky was already an alcoholic, trying to work odd jobs, but he gave up. Jill was young, but the bullying at school took its toll. Willa finally homeschooled Jill until she could get into college."

"Neighbors turned on neighbors."

Mike shrugged. "It happens. Things calmed down some after a few years, but it'll never be the same for them. They tried to sell the land a few years ago, but there were no takers."

"Jill called it a curse."

"I'd have to agree. And I can see why she'd want help clearing it."

"Any suggestions?"

Mike leaned back in his chair and looked up at the ceiling, hands clasped behind his head. When he looked at me again, his blue eyes gleamed. His second tell. The challenge had been accepted, the bit caught between his teeth. He'd help me in any way he could. He pushed a lock of dark-brown hair away from his forehead. "If I were starting this over, I'd start with Gen's family."

"Nicholas Eaton?"

"No." He shook his head. "Although you need to talk to him as well. No, start with the Marshalls. Her mom is alive, and Gen and her brothers were extremely close, even though they were a lot older. Jack and . . . I forget the other one. I always suspected this had a lot less to do with Gen's marriage than it did with something that happened in her past. Start there."

"You got it, Boss." I stood. "Still up for dinner tonight?"

"You cooking?"

I looked at him askance, and he laughed. "Baker's it is. I'll pick you up about six."

I grinned and turned. "I might even dress up," I said over my shoulder.

"For Baker's?"

I paused and winked at him. "No, not for Baker's."

His cheeks flushed, and I opened the door.

"Star?"

I looked back. "Be careful?"

His face was solemn again. "And skirt the Turneys as long as you can."

CIRCLE OF VENGEANCE

Kevin once took a shot at me before he realized I was a cop. He might have been a nice guy in the past, but he's turned bitter, reclusive, and I can't say I blame him. And don't forget that something got Gen Marshall killed. Jill may have hired you, but she's not the key to any of this. Don't get shot."

"The core of all my plans, Michael, my friend."