

*"In The Cantaloupe Thief Deb Richardson-Moore spices her perfectly paced story with just enough detail to let us see, hear, know, and feel exactly what we need and no more. And she does it with writing that's vibrant, crisp, and real – we're treated to a master storyteller showing us how it's done. Murder may be the plot that drives Richardson-Moore's yank-you-in-from-the-first-sentence yarn, but it's her supple and admirable talent that's to die for."*

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*"Prepare to read Deb Richardson-Moore's The Cantaloupe Thief like you're getting ready for a southern snowstorm. Run out and buy your bread and milk, stock the pantry to the brim, and cross everything off your calendar, because once reporter Branigan Powers draws you into her mystery, you'll stick fast to the couch until you turn the last page. Bravo to Deb for creating a captivating novel so full of heart, humour, and suspense. I simply loved it."*

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*"Fantastically entertaining, this beautifully written, intelligent page-turner gets at both the prejudice and promise of the New South. Our curious heroine, Branigan Powers, has guts and heart. Deb has concocted a winner in this first installment of a great mystery series."*

**Matt Matthews, author of *Mercy Creek***

*"Deb brings the authenticity of her own work with the homeless and extensive background in newspapers to this terrific debut with a twist ending you'll never see coming. I can't wait to see what Branigan Powers takes on next."*

**Susan Clary Simmons, former Executive Editor,  
Greenville Journal**

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# THE CANTALOUPE THIEF

A BRANIGAN POWERS MYSTERY

DEB RICHARDSON-MOORE



LION FICTION

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*To the late Vina and Durey Powers,  
Georgia farmers.  
And to Rick,  
Ronald and Lori,  
fellow cantaloupe eaters.*



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# PROLOGUE

**JULY 5, TEN YEARS AGO**

Alberta felt every one of her eighty 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 tête-à-tête 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 mimicked 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.

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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 ONE

## 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, twenty-six-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, sixty-ish, 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?"

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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, startled.

“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 reinvented 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 sixty-five and at the end of her career. Instead, she was forty-one, 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.



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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 TWO

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 of crack, 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 and 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

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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.