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Also by Deb Richardson-Moore

The Weight of Mercy: A Novice Pastor on the City Streets
The Cantaloupe Thief



THE COVERSTORY

A BRANIGAN POWERS MYSTERY

DEB RICHARDSON-MOORE



LION FICTION

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*To Susan, Wanda, Jeanne and Allison,
generous givers of time and advice,
and
to Lynne and Lynn
brave women, title peddlers*

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PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

Charlie Delaney slammed her exam booklet against the desk top, shaking her wrist and forearm to ease the ache of answering three essay questions. She was happy with her discussions of Kurt Vonnegut and Alice Munro, less so with her take on John Updike.

But it was over, she told herself with a sigh. Over and done until January 7.

She glanced around the University of Georgia classroom, where another twenty-two students still worked, heads down, finishing one last thought even though the professor had called time. She was the only freshman in the upper-level class in Contemporary American Fiction, due to an error in registration. By the time it'd been discovered, she was a month into her first semester and holding her own. So her academic adviser tapped his pen against his lip and told her to enjoy the only small class she had.

Charlie stood and shrugged into her backpack, flipping her reddish gold ponytail out of the way. Over her athletic frame she wore the ubiquitous UGA black and red sweatshirt, plenty warm enough for a day in the high 50s. This was her last exam and she was headed home. She could barely suppress a grin as she nodded goodbye to youngish Dr Dorchester with the auburn braid, and walked into the mid-December sunshine.

She tapped Janie Rose's number into her phone, singing "I'm finished!" when she connected.

"Me too," Janie Rose answered. "I'm at your car."

The girls had agreed to forgo lunch so they could be on the road by noon. Charlie had packed last night during a study break, anxious to put academics behind her for awhile, eager to return home and see her parents, grandparents and brother. She'd been

surprised when Janie Rose asked for a ride; she figured the off-campus sophomore would want her own car over the three-week Christmas break. But Janie Rose said there was an extra at her house, and Charlie didn't doubt it. Probably more than one. Janie Rose's father was CEO of Shaner Steel, headquartered in Grambling. Her mother was a professor at Rutherford Lee College, a private liberal arts school on the city's edge. Janie Rose was their only child, and she lacked for nothing.

The Carlton family had moved to Grambling when Janie Rose was in middle school. She and Charlie hadn't been close friends, and were a year apart in school. Still, they had several mutual friends and ran into each other occasionally. When they found themselves in a college maths class that finished at lunchtime, they began eating together a couple of times a week.

Trotting towards her dorm, Charlie spied Janie Rose leaning against the faded red Jeep Cherokee Charlie had shared with her brother Chan all through high school. An enormous suitcase sat at the girl's feet.

"Looks like you're ready to go!" called Charlie.

Janie Rose jumped.

"Sorry," said Charlie, coming alongside her. "Did I scare you?"

"No. I'm just ready to get out of here. Aren't you?"

"You bet. My lit exam was a bear. Let me grab my bag and we'll hit the road." She unlocked the passenger door. "I could've picked you up at your apartment, you know."

"That's okay. I'll leave my car in your lot."

"Then go ahead and load up."

Janie Rose glanced around the parking lot, then lifted the Jeep's rear door. She looked around again before hoisting her suitcase.

"Just leave it open for me," Charlie called over her shoulder, but Janie Rose ignored her, closed the rear hatch and hopped into the passenger seat.

Charlie wondered momentarily at her friend's watchfulness, then forgot it.

Five minutes later, she was back in the parking lot, a navy pea

coat in one hand, her old soccer duffle bag, stuffed with clean and dirty clothes, in the other. She tossed both into the rear of the Jeep, then climbed into the driver's seat.

"I am so ready for Mom's lasagna," she said. "And Grandma's biscuits. And cinnamon rolls. And hot chocolate."

Janie Rose smiled – nervously, Charlie thought. "Clearly you don't have gluten allergies," she said.

Charlie tried to make conversation as she turned out of the dorm parking lot. "Where do you guys spend Christmas?"

"At our house. My grandparents sometimes come for the day."

"We bounce around between my grandparents' houses and ours and my aunts'," Charlie said. "It's chaotic."

"Sounds nice."

"Yeah, it really is."

Janie Rose seemed to calm down a little once the girls had left the Athens campus and pulled onto US 441, a meandering two-lane road that would take them to Interstate 85.

"Is everything all right?" Charlie asked. "You seem a little... tense."

"Just tired, I guess. I had four monster exams."

Charlie turned on the radio, flipping through two versions of "Jingle Bell Rock" until she found the slightly more palatable "Little Drummer Boy".

"I can finally get into the Christmas spirit," she sighed. "Pah rum pa pa pum."

Janie Rose gave a slight smile, and rolled her shoulders and neck. "I am tense. Guess it was all that studying."

Charlie glanced into the rearview mirror. Every twenty seconds, she could hear her dad saying. Look in the rearview mirror every twenty seconds. She'd missed her dad this semester. His calmness. His steadiness. He was her greatest cheerleader, even when, as she was learning to drive, she'd spied vultures in the field alongside the road and slid slowly into the ditch. He'd let her, not hollering, not startling her. When she realized what she'd done, she looked over and her dad was grinning. Then he got out and pushed the car

back onto the road. “Best way to make sure you don’t do it when it counts,” he’d said matter-of-factly.

Now, without him next to her, she startled when she looked in the mirror. There was a black car on her bumper. “Where’d you come from?” Charlie said aloud.

Janie Rose whipped around. “What?” she said.

“That black car. It’s right on our butt.”

Janie Rose peered at it for a long moment, her face draining of color. “It’s a hearse,” she whispered.

“How can you tell?”

“I can see the length from this angle. Curtains in the back. The old-fashioned kind.”

Charlie pulled as far as she could to the right, inviting the hearse to pass. With a dotted line and no cars in sight, it would be easy.

To her relief, the car pulled into the left lane. As it pulled abreast, she saw that Janie Rose was right: it was an old hearse, its black paint faded to iron gray. Short black curtains hung the full length, stopping at the front seat. Or what Charlie supposed was the front seat: the passenger window was tinted, so she couldn’t see anyone or anything inside.

But now, instead of speeding past the Jeep, the hearse began to edge to the right.

“Hey!” Charlie shouted. “Look out!” She took her foot off the accelerator, trying to fall behind. But the hearse did the same. It inched closer and closer to Charlie’s door. Anxiety rising, breath quickening, she sped up, but so did the hearse. Side by side, the cars drove like hitched horses down the rural stretch. To her right, flat soybean fields flashed by one minute, a stand of trees the next.

But this was northeast Georgia, and now the road rose. Beyond the shoulders, the fields gave way to thick forests lower than the road bed. To swerve off now would be to slide down an embankment and into the trees.

Charlie looked frantically in her rearview mirror, hoping to spot another car. But the road was empty behind and ahead. She stomped her foot to the floor. The old Jeep hesitated for several counts, then

shuddered and leaped ahead. The hearse momentarily fell behind.

What was going on? She chanced a look at Janie Rose, who was plastered against the seat, eyes wide, face white, one hand clasping the handle above her door, the other planted on the dashboard.

The hearse caught up with them, accelerated into the left lane and began nudging towards Charlie again. “Stop it!” she screamed, looking toward the car’s darkened interior to no avail. “Stop it!”

Any driver behaving so aggressively would have been terrifying. Somehow it was scarier that Charlie couldn’t see anyone inside the eerie old hearse.

Worse yet, she was going much too fast. She clenched the steering wheel, knuckles straining against skin, heart pounding. “Stop it!” she shrieked again.

The hearse, flying alongside the Jeep, finally stopped its sideways inching toward Charlie’s door. She barely registered the change, then realized the reason for it. The hearse’s nose now swerved toward her, leaving Charlie no choice but to yank violently to the right herself.

The top-heavy Jeep began to flip, side over side, down a shallow embankment, towards the tree line. Inside, Janie Rose’s screams joined hers.

CHAPTER TWO

Branigan Powers was thinking about eggs. Not cooking or eating them. She wasn't a fan of the poached, fried, boiled or scrambled egg, and kept them on hand only for rare cookie baking. In fact, she sometimes threw them out because she went so long between baking stints.

So, No. 1, she was wondering if there were actually any eggs at home in her fridge. She needed to bake cookies for tomorrow night's staff party.

No. 2, she was thinking about the economy of eggs in northeast Georgia. What had once been an area rich in chicken farmers was now rich in egg farmers. That might sound like the same thing to the uninitiated. But Branigan's grandfather had raised chickens in two long, low heated houses – bringing in loads of fluffy yellow baby chicks that squeaked and peeped and scurried to one end of the long house. Months later, he'd barely be able to get into the houses because the grown white chickens took up so much room. He entered carefully, cautioning Branigan and her twin brother against making any sudden moves, so the chickens wouldn't stampede and smother each other. Chickens, Pa said, weren't the brightest animals on the farm. When they got to that house-filling adult size, big trucks came in and loaded them up. Branigan didn't like to think about that part, about what came next.

But now Pa's chicken houses sat empty, and a lot of the neighboring farms had the word EGGS written in giant letters over wide, two-story buildings, complete with parking lots. MASON EGGS. SHIPLEY EGGS. EDGAR EGGS. Chickens were presumably somewhere around, but it was eggs that the trucks loaded and shipped to grocery stores all over the South.

That was the story Branigan was writing for *The Grambling Rambler*, part business story, part holiday feature. How an upturn in holiday baking affected egg sales. While there wasn't enough Hanukkah baking so you'd notice in Grambling, there was in nearby Atlanta and the other cities served by Grambling's egg farms. So she included challah bread and the double-baked Mandelbrot along with the sugar cookies and gingerbread men and coconut cake she was writing about.

She typed a final paragraph mindlessly. She'd had about all she could take of this Christmas baking cheer. She was not looking forward to making Crunchy Jumble cookies – the secret to the crunch being Rice Krispies. She was not looking forward to the newspaper's annual staff party. She was not looking forward, even, to Christmas.

The events of the previous summer still weighed on her. She'd covered the murders of several homeless people, and it had ended badly. Trying to get into the Christmas spirit was agonizing to contemplate. Branigan wished she could circle December 26 on the calendar and be magically transported. The only bright spot was her nephew Chan heading home from Furman University later in the week, and his sister Charlie coming in from the University of Georgia.

Branigan stood and stretched, her back and shoulder muscles stiff from hunching over a laptop. Across the largely empty newsroom, she could hear the familiar sound of the police scanner squawking irritably to life. Jody Manson, the paper's police/court/government reporter leaned in closer. He jumped up and grabbed his jacket, calling to the city editor, "Fatality out near 85. You want a photo?"

"How far away?"

"Thirty, thirty-five miles. Sounds like the Athens exit."

"I'll call the stringer in Athens," the editor said, reaching for his phone.

Somebody's Christmas just got ruined, Branigan thought. Like mine.

It was past noon, and Branigan was scheduled to meet her friend Liam Delaney at 12:30 for lunch at Marshall's, a downtown diner.

She pulled on a hip-length camel coat, freeing her shoulder-length blonde hair from its collar with a tug. She added a navy and emerald plaid scarf, purchased when the saleswoman exclaimed over the green's exact match to Branigan's eyes. Her eyes, an unusually vivid shade of green, often drew comments from salespeople.

She strode down the sunny sidewalk with the easy gait of a longtime runner, a practice she'd kept since high school more than two decades before. Purple and yellow and white pansies hung in the iron planters on the streetlights, a touch of old Grambling charm. On the other side of the lamp poles were stiff banners of gold sprinkled with glittery white snowflakes. This part of the South seldom saw the real kind.

She arrived at Marshall's with five minutes to spare. She found a table near the plate-glass windows, warmed by noon-day sun, and ordered an iced tea. Then she sat back to read the morning's paper a little more thoroughly than she'd managed at 8 a.m.

Robbery of a Salvation Army kettle. Sheesh. Was nothing sacred? The opening of the holiday ice rink on Main Street.

In the Style section, a preview of a Moravian love feast on the Rutherford Lee campus. And a production of *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever* at the Grambling Little Theatre. Branigan smiled at that. Maybe she could talk Aunt Jeanie into going.

The waitress came back, and Branigan looked at her watch: 12:45. Maybe Liam had forgotten. She called his cell phone, and left a message. "Did you forget me? I'm at Marshall's."

She wanted to talk to him about a story that Tanenbaum Grambling IV had requested. "Requested" as in "assigned", since Tan was editor and publisher of *The Rambler*. Tan wanted her to revisit the homeless encampment that she and Jody and Marjorie had written about last summer. "People want to know how these folks survive in the winter," he said; "what they do for Christmas. What are the agencies doing? The churches? Is there any coordination?"

Branigan planned to start with Liam, her old high school friend and former newspaper colleague, who was pastor of Jericho Road. His church had eighteen beds for homeless men, as well as a soup

kitchen, social worker/mental health counselor, art room, music program and growing worship services. She knew a lot about Grambling's homeless community from her stories the previous summer, but she was hoping that Liam could fast-track her to the best sources for an update.

Only now he was really late, and she was starving. She signaled the waitress and ordered Marshall's famous vegetable soup and cornbread. She was just scraping her bowl clean when her cell phone rang.

She saw it was from Liam, and answered, "Where are you?"

"The ER. It's Charlie."

"What happened?"

"She's been in a bad accident. On her way home from school."

Branigan remembered Jody's police scanner. "Not the one on I-85?"

"On 441, close to it."

"Is she...?" Branigan couldn't finish the sentence. Her mind spun wildly. They wouldn't take a fatality to the emergency room, would they?

"We don't know anything yet," Liam said. "Her Jeep flipped. The girl in the passenger seat was killed."

"Oh, Liam, no! Who was it?"

"A friend from UGA. Janie Rose Carlton. You know her?"

"I know her mother. She teaches at Rutherford Lee. Oh, man. Janie Rose is her only child. Are the Carltons with you?"

"No, and I don't know much of anything at this point. Liz is on her way. The doctors kicked me out temporarily and I remembered I was supposed to be meeting you."

"I'll be there in a few minutes. Oh, wait! Liam!"

"Yeah?"

"Which hospital? Athens or here?"

"Here," he said. "St Joe's. The paramedics were able to reach me in time to ask."

Branigan threw more money than was necessary on the table and ran out.

CHAPTER THREE

The chaplain intern, a fluttery young woman who seemed intimidated by the fact that Liam was a pastor, placed Liam, his wife Liz and Branigan in a room for families of trauma patients. Technically, Branigan wasn't family, but no one was checking IDs. She was the biological aunt of Charlie's adopted brother, Chan; to both teens, she had always been Aunt Brani.

Liz looked unnerved to find Ina Rose and Harry Carlton already in the waiting room. Harry Carlton stared blankly, and Ina Rose said, "They brought Janie Rose to the hospital morgue. We're waiting to see her."

The intern moved a box of tissues closer to Ina Rose, but spoke to Liz and Liam. "We're waiting for a doctor to take them."

Liam nodded. He'd been in the intern's place during his own Clinical Pastoral Education rotation. Clearly the couple were in shock, so he gently took over. "Is there anyone I can call for you? A pastor? Janie Rose's grandparents?"

Harry Carlton looked at him as if he were speaking Hebrew.

"Why was she riding with your daughter?" He turned to his wife. "Why wasn't she in her own car?"

Liz stiffened, hearing the unspoken accusation. Ina Rose spoke to the Delaneys as well as to her husband. "She told me she asked Charlie for a ride, but I really don't know why. She said she would drive our Subaru over Christmas." She looked around helplessly. "We have an extra car. Two now, I guess."

Realizing what she'd said, she clamped a hand over her mouth to strangle a sob.

"Was she speeding?" Harry Carlton demanded. "Did your daughter speed?"

Liz started to speak, but Liam put a hand on her arm. "Mr Carlton, we have no way of knowing yet. The state patrol is on the scene. But Charlie is a good driver, a safe driver. It could've been a deer or a dog, or anything. We just don't know yet."

"We are very sorry for your loss," Liz said, standing and heading for the door. "I'm going to see about Charlie."

Darkness had fallen by the time Charlie was stabilized and moved from the trauma unit to a private room at St Joseph Medical Center. Since both her parents and, eventually, all four of her grandparents were on hand, Branigan was careful to remain in the background, fetching coffee, finding powdery creamers, and driving to the Delaneys' to pack an overnight bag for Liz. In a call from the newsroom, Jody had also given her the unpleasant task of approaching the Carltons to see if they wanted to comment for *The Rambler's* story. They didn't.

Harry Carlton glared at her, but Ina Rose, with whom she was acquainted through previous stories at the college, attempted a smile.

"Whenever you're ready," Branigan told her as they left the hospital. "Some families like people to know who their loved one was. But it's totally up to you."

"Maybe later," Ina Rose said.

The couple climbed into a gleaming black Mercedes and drove away. Branigan made her way back to the fourth floor, where Charlie lay with her right arm and leg broken, three ribs cracked. Both eyes were blackened and her pretty face was swollen. Two lower teeth were missing.

Branigan was about to leave as Charlie woke up. Liam and Liz and their parents crowded around her bed. Branigan hung back, giving them privacy.

After a few minutes, she heard Charlie ask, "Dad, is... Aunt Brani here?"

"She sure is." Liz's and Liam's parents, looking relieved, stepped away to give Branigan room. Liz's mom squeezed her arm, and her dad gave her a quick hug.

Charlie's blue eyes, hardly recognizable in her battered face, sought Branigan's. "Aunt... Brani," she said, her voice thick and raspy. "It wasn't... accident."

"What?" Liz and Liam exclaimed at the same time. Charlie's eyes flitted to them, closed briefly. "I need... to tell... Aunt Brani..." She was fighting the pain meds the doctors had given her, struggling to stay awake.

Liz and Liam remained rooted to her bedside. "What, baby girl?" Branigan whispered.

"The... police," she said. "Tell... police." Her eyelids flickered. Branigan leaned closer. "Tell the police what?"

Charlie whispered one more phrase, then fell asleep again.

"It was whose?" Branigan said. "Janie Rose's?"

"What'd she say?" Liam asked.

"It was hers, I think she said."

"What was hers?" asked Liz.

CHAPTER FOUR

Malachi Ezekiel Martin scrunched against a wall in the emergency waiting room, as far from the entrance and its blasts of cold air as he could get. From his place there, next to Roger the Dodger who sounded like he was hacking up a lung, he watched Pastor Liam, then Miz Liz, then Miz Branigan race in. A little later, Miz Branigan rushed out, only to return with a suitcase.

Hours later, he saw Miz Branigan, looking mighty uncomfortable, walk out with a slumped couple, the woman all crying, the man like he had a broomstick up his butt. Miz Branigan watched, arms folded, as they got into a big black car.

Something was up with Pastor Liam's family. He could stop Miz Branigan and ask. They were friends. Yeah, he'd say they were friends. But everyone looked so serious and so sad he didn't want to bother them. After he'd gotten Roger the Dodger seen to, he'd bike over to Jericho Road and ask what was up. The dudes there would know.

Roger the Dodger wasn't getting the attention Pastor Liam's family had got. But then the homeless usually didn't – unless it was a heart attack or stroke or car versus bicycle situation. For casual homeless diseases – Malachi suspected bronchitis from the way Roger was wheezing – a man might die of boredom before the disease got him.

The bad part was they'd wasted a warm day inside the waiting room. Now that the sun was down, it'd turned cold. Malachi could feel it every time that door whooshed open. Now was the time you wanted to hit the emergency room. Malachi had spent many a winter's night in these chairs coughing dramatically when a security guard walked by.

Malachi looked over at Roger, slumped and coughing for real.