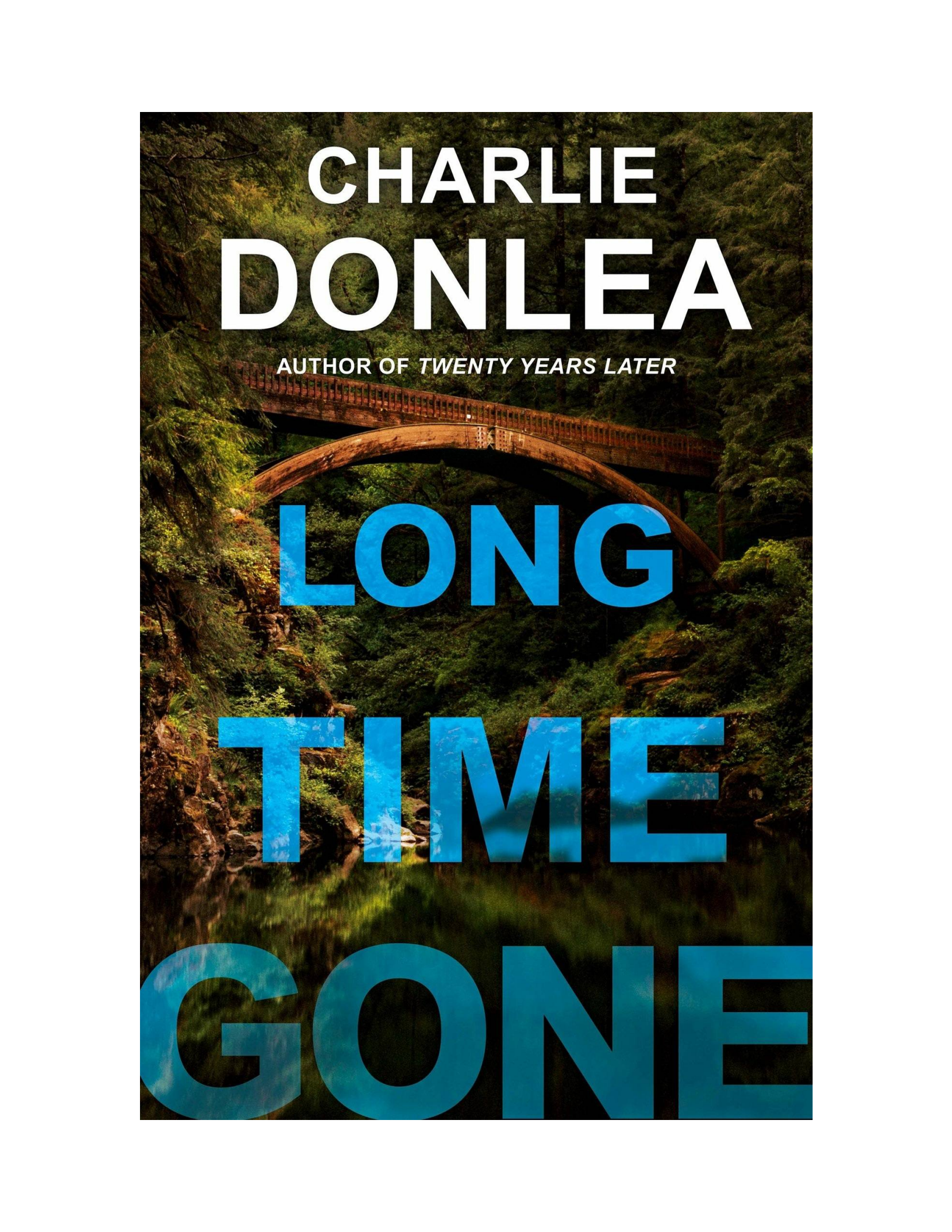
A photograph of a wooden arch bridge spanning a river in a lush, green forest. The bridge is made of dark wood and has a simple railing. The river below is calm, reflecting the surrounding trees and the bridge. The overall scene is peaceful and scenic.

# CHARLIE DONLEA

*AUTHOR OF TWENTY YEARS LATER*

# LONG TIME GONE





CHARLIE  
DONLEA

*AUTHOR OF TWENTY YEARS LATER*

LONG  
TIME  
GONE

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THE GIRL WHO WAS TAKEN

DON'T BELIEVE IT

SOME CHOOSE DARKNESS

THE SUICIDE HOUSE

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THOSE EMPTY EYES

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**LONG TIME GONE**



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“Photographs open doors into the past but they also allow a look into the future.”

—Sally Mann



## Cedar Creek, Nevada

### July 13, 1995 9 Days After . . .

A BLACK TAILED COOPER'S HAWK WITNESSED THE DEATH OF SHERIFF Sanford Stamos.

The majestic bird glided down from the heavens and landed on the front of the police cruiser, perching like an ornate hood ornament. It squawked once during the battle that took place inside the vehicle, fanning its wings as the car rocked. When the scuffle ended, the hawk folded its wings into its body as Sheriff Sanford Stamos sat in the driver's seat and looked his killer in the eye. The sheriff's icy glare came not from an intense determination to lock eyes with the man who was about to kill him, but rather from the paralytic drug that coursed through his body and prevented even his eyes from moving.

He wanted to do a thousand things other than gawk at the man next to him. His training told him to either engage his attacker or put distance between them. He wanted to escape his vehicle, to draw his gun, to call for backup. But the needle hanging from his neck had robbed him of the ability to move and brought on a profound weakness that infected every fiber of his body. The drug finally stole the function from his eyelids and they fell shut. Sitting behind the wheel of his squad car, Sandy's chin slumped to his chest. The odd angle brought on a raspy snore when he breathed. Sandy had no doubt he was about to die. The things he had discovered during the last few days of his investigation into the missing Margolis family guaranteed it.

He heard the passenger-side door open and close as his killer exited the vehicle. Sandy's door opened next, and he felt the shirtsleeve of his left arm being tugged upward. A tight band cinched the skin of his bicep before a sharp pinprick on the inside of his elbow jolted his eyelids open. There wasn't much there besides brightness. His vision was blurry, like someone had smeared Vaseline into his eyes.

A localized burning assaulted his arm as the syringe was emptied into the vein. A moment later he felt something else entirely. Something foreign and exotic and more sensational than he'd ever felt before. A cloud of euphoria descended over him, or perhaps he rose up into it. Either way, Sheriff Stamos forgot about the confinement of his vehicle. He forgot about his inability to move or talk. He worried not about his killer, but instead relaxed into the bliss that filled his body and mind. His soul, too? Was his soul being touched?

"You're just another Harrison County junkie now."

Sandy couldn't tell if the voice was his own or someone else's. If it originated from inside his head or was spoken to him. But he didn't really care. A second syringe was emptied into his arm before the door to his squad car slammed shut and another level of ecstasy took control of his faculties. So powerful was the pull of the drug coursing through his system that it disengaged Sandy from his body. He floated above the scene in a way that allowed him to see where he was and what was happening. Seated in his squad car with the seatbelt tight across his chest, he watched from his elevated perch as his vehicle rolled down a shallow hill toward Cedar Creek. Just before the patrol car speared into the water, the Cooper's hawk that was balanced on the hood took flight. Two strokes from its powerful wings lifted the bird into the air until the creek breeze allowed the hawk to hover overhead, wings outstretched. The car continued until the hood

sunk beneath the water. The slow creep persisted and Cedar Creek eventually swallowed the automobile, ingesting it fully until only the taillights peeked from the surface.

A foggy comprehension told Sandy he was submerged under the surface of Cedar Creek, but the feeling of euphoria and exhilaration that ran warm through his veins brought with it a weighty apathy that was impossible to overcome. He cared little about the water rising up his chest and lapping at his chin, threatening to crawl up his face and over his head. Instead, he was anxious to fly into the stupor that waited somewhere off in the by-and-by. He was mesmerized by the brightness he saw in the distance. He ignored the scene of his body trapped beneath the surface of Cedar Creek, and instead followed the black-tailed Cooper's hawk as it soared toward the light. He flew and flew and flew, until the brightness absorbed him and ushered him away.

# **PART I**

## **Genealogy 101**



# CHAPTER 1

**Raleigh, North Carolina Monday, July 1, 2024**

SLOAN HASTINGS WALKED INTO THE OFFICE OF THE CHIEF MEDICAL Examiner fifteen minutes prior to the 9:00 a.m. start time that marked the beginning of her forensic pathology training. She and three other fellows were about to embark on a challenging two-year fellowship that would culminate with each of them being crowned a medical examiner. That was, of course, if they could handle the trials and tribulations that waited for them. Sloan was sure she could. Becoming a forensic pathologist was all she'd ever dreamt of doing.

A Duke graduate with a dual degree in criminology and forensic science, Sloan had cruised through medical school before completing a four-year anatomical and clinical pathology residency. Now, she was twenty-nine years old, and all that stood in the way of accomplishing her dream were two intense years of fellowship. The first of which was a grant-sponsored research year that required Sloan to explore an area of forensic pathology, advance the subject in some meaningful way, and write a thesis paper on the topic. After her research year, she would embark on a twelve-month clinical program at the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner studying under the renowned Dr. Livia Cutty. There, she would perform hundreds of autopsies on her way to becoming a medical examiner. She was anxious. She was excited. And she was hungry.

Dressed in a sleeveless black blouse that showed off her CrossFit-built athletic frame, white slacks, and high heels, Sloan showed her new ID card—which proclaimed her to be one of four first-year fellows as of 9:00 a.m. that morning—to the woman at the front desk. The door adjacent to the desk buzzed. She walked through and headed for “the cage.”

Inside the OCME, and to new fellows in particular, the cage was infamous. Closed in by chain-link fencing and filled with rows and rows of forward-facing chairs, the cage was where fellows presented their cases each afternoon. Standing before the attending physicians and bathed in the glow of the SMART Board was like standing in front of a firing squad. Rumors and folklore ran rampant of fellows being crucified as they squirmed at the front of the cage while they stumbled through their cases and fielded questions from the wizards they were training under, who caught every misstep, highlighted every oversight, and corrected every misguided thought. It was a place Sloan feared, and couldn't wait to conquer.

Sloan knew the morgue was located in the basement, that the attending physicians' offices were located on the second floor, and that the cage was somewhere on the first floor. She wandered only for a moment before she found it, walking through the entrance at the back of the room and taking an aisle seat. Thirty or so folding chairs lined the room, each facing a screen that captured light from a projector that hung from the ceiling and greeted Sloan and her colleagues:

*Welcome First Year Fellows !*

The other fellows soon arrived, introductions were made, and conversations started about where they had each completed their residencies and what they thought they were in for during the next two years. At exactly 9:00 a.m., a woman wearing green scrubs and a long white coat walked into the cage.

“Good morning, newbies,” Dr. Livia Cutty said as she made her way up the middle aisle and took a spot in front of the SMART Board. “Good to see all of you again.”

Dr. Cutty had interviewed every candidate that applied to her prestigious forensic pathology fellowship, and had handpicked the four who sat before her.

“It seems like a lifetime ago that I was sitting where you are today—as a first-year fellow nervous and excited about what lay ahead. In reality, it was only seven years ago.”

Dr. Livia Cutty was the youngest physician to ever chair the fellowship program at the OCME in Raleigh, North Carolina. The former chairman and Livia’s mentor, Dr. Gerald Colt, had aggressively recruited her when he retired the previous year. In less than a decade since she’d completed her training, Livia Cutty had crafted a storied career as a medical examiner. For the last few years she had worked as the Chief Medical Examiner in Manhattan and had thrived in New York. Over the years Livia had been involved with several high-profile cases, and had served as the medical advisor for multiple television networks including FOX, CNN, and NBC. Her current side gig was dishing about forensics for HAP News during her frequent appearances on the hit newsmagazine show *American Events*.

“Since I’m not too far removed from where you are now,” Livia started, “know that I will not only understand what you’re going through during these next two years, but I will empathize with you as well. I’ll be hard on you, just like my mentors were hard on me. But I’ll be fair. We all have the same goal, which is to mold each of you into the best and brightest medical examiners this country has to offer. My pledge to you is to provide the tools and the opportunities to get you there. What I ask from each of you is that you give me your best effort. Deal?”

“Deal,” Sloan said in unison with her colleagues.

Sloan was, she admitted, star struck as she stared at Livia Cutty. She’d seen the woman so many times on television, either discussing high-profile forensic cases or offering expert testimony and analysis on *American Events*, that it was surreal to be sitting in front of her now. Even harder to comprehend that she would be training under her.

For most of her life Sloan had ranked as the best and the brightest in the endeavors she took on, whether that was leading her debate team in high school, mastering the maze of cranial nerves in anatomy lab, or cranking out burpees with her CrossFit buddies. She always rose to the challenge and was determined to do the same during her time studying under Livia Cutty.

## CHAPTER 2

Raleigh, North Carolina Monday, July 1, 2024

DR. CUTTY SPOKE FOR THIRTY MINUTES, GIVING SLOAN AND THE other first-year fellows the lay of the land and reviewing what would be expected during their research year. The twelve months were not entirely void of morgue time. In addition to their research, each of them would be paired with a second-year fellow and would be required to observe five postmortem examinations each month during summer. Ten during winter. The final three months would require them to not only assist with the postmortem exams, but also present the cases to the attending physicians and subspecialty pathologists that made up the staff at the OCME. The second year of fellowship would throw them fully into the morgue, promising each fellow two hundred fifty to three hundred autopsies by the time they finished their training.

“Any questions?” Livia asked.

There were none. Livia checked her watch.

“Okay, for the rest of the morning I’m scheduled with each of you for a thirty-minute session to discuss your research topic. Sloan, you’re up first.”

Sloan smiled and stood.

“We’ll talk in my office,” Livia said. “Feel free to grab coffee,” she said to the other fellows. “And while you’re waiting, walk around and get to know this place. It’s going to be your home for the next two years.”

Sloan waved goodbye to her new colleagues and followed Dr. Cutty out of the cage. They walked down the hallway and into Livia’s office.

“Have a seat.”

Sloan sat in front of the desk while Livia slid into her chair and began typing at her computer.

“The staff here at the OCME has chosen four topics unique to forensic pathology, and we randomly assigned each of our fellows to one of them. Ready to hear what the next year of your life will revolve around?”

“Ready,” Sloan said.

The two-year fellowship opportunity under Dr. Livia Cutty was unique compared to other forensic pathology fellowships across the country, which were each made up of just a single year of training. The extra year with Dr. Cutty promised a stronger résumé for those seeking positions tangential to criminology and law enforcement. Sloan’s dream was to work side-by-side with a major homicide unit, and she had set her sights on Livia Cutty’s program the day she started residency four years earlier.

“Your area of interest,” Livia said, “will be forensic and investigative genealogy.”

Sloan raised her eyebrows and nodded. “Okay,” she said slowly.

“Not familiar with this area of forensics?”

“I think we covered it in one of my college courses, but that feels like a lifetime ago.”

“A lot has changed since then. It’s a constantly evolving specialty. Forensic genealogy is the science behind the breaks in more than a few high-profile cold cases that have been in the news over the last few years. The most well-known is probably the Golden State Killer case. Do you



know the case?”

“I know *of* it,” Sloan said.

“During the seventies, a guy went on an extended spree of rape and murder in Northern California. Each incident was a middle-of-the-night home invasion. From a few of the scenes, police were able to secure the suspect’s DNA. There was no national DNA database back then, so the DNA went unidentified but was preserved as evidence. The guy continued his reign of terror into the early eighties, and then abruptly stopped. His DNA remained unidentified for decades until really smart investigators decided to tap into online genealogy databases in an effort to identify the source of the old crime scene DNA.”

“Like Ancestry dot com? The online sites where people submit their DNA to create family trees and learn about their heritage?”

“Correct,” Livia said. “Ancestry dot com, Twenty-Three and Me. There’re dozens of them, and they contain a treasure trove of genetic information. Bigger than any database law enforcement could ever create.”

“But no serial killer is dumb enough to submit their own DNA to one of these sites.”

Livia shook her head. “The killers don’t, but their unsuspecting relatives do. Cold case detectives working the Golden State Killer case took a chance and submitted the killer’s DNA, which had been sequestered from one of the crime scenes and preserved for decades, to GEDmatch—a free service that allows users to upload and analyze their DNA sequences—and hoped for a hit. Low and behold, the killer’s DNA showed a genetic link—a match, they call it—to a man who had uploaded his DNA sequence and was identified as a second cousin to whoever the Golden State Killer was. Then the investigative work began. A genealogist working with detectives tracked down the cousin and worked backwards to create a family tree. Second cousins led to first cousins. First cousins led to aunts and uncles. And so on down the genetic line. Detectives researched every relative to see if any of them lived in the areas where the crimes had taken place. After some legwork, they narrowed their list down to just a couple of names. Then they did some stakeout work and waited each week until these potential suspects wheeled their garbage cans to the curb. A DNA sample taken from a used tissue in one of the suspect’s garbage bins was an exact match to the DNA sequestered from the crime scenes. An arrest was made and the decades-old case of the Golden State Killer was solved.”

“Fascinating.”

“I’m glad you think so, because you’re about to spend a year of your life researching this topic and finding a way to advance it.”

Livia slid a three-ring binder across the desk.

“This contains everything that will be required to complete the project. Of course, your research will culminate in a thesis paper that you will present at the end of the year. Information about ‘Presentation Day,’ as it’s called, is also in the binder. The presentation must fill four hours, broken into two two-hour segments. There are benchmarks that you’ll be expected to meet throughout the year, and they’re aimed at keeping you on schedule. We’ll meet to review your progress every three months. And, of course, you’ll be required to keep up with the second-year fellow you’ve been assigned to and also reach the milestones laid out that will prepare you for the second, clinical, year of fellowship.”

“Understood,” Sloan said.

“I’ve given you a lot of information this morning. Take a day or two to review and process all of it. If you have questions, find me. I’m always available. And I’ll give you a little bit of advice my mentor gave me: Procrastination is the devil’s way of stealing your time. Avoid it at all costs.

Get busy and stay busy.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

## CHAPTER 3

**Raleigh, North Carolina Tuesday, July 2, 2024**

SLOAN GRABBED HER MAIL FROM A ROW OF BOXES BEFORE SHE WALKED up the steps of her apartment—a one-bedroom in Trinity Circle. Inside, she popped open a Diet Dr. Pepper, her beverage of choice and the secret weapon, along with her obsession with CrossFit, that had helped her survive both medical school and residency. At the kitchen table she flipped open her laptop. She'd spent the previous day reading through the information contained in the giant three-ring binder Dr. Cutty had given her, making notes, and outlining the approach she would take to researching, dissecting, and somehow advancing the field of forensic and investigative genealogy.

The first thing she'd have to do is find a case that had been solved using DNA profiles stored on databases of online ancestry sites. She knew better than to consider the Golden State Killer case. It was too well known, too mainstream, and completely unoriginal. She made a list of people she needed to get in touch with. It included homicide detectives, genealogists, and maybe a reporter or two who had covered true crime and could tip her off to a less well-known case involving forensic genealogy.

She took a sip of Dr. Pepper and got busy on her laptop, deciding that contacting a genealogist would be the easiest of the three. A quick search brought up a website for the Association of Professional Genealogists. Sloan paged through scores of profiles until she found a genealogist named James Clayton located in North Carolina. The profile included an email address, so she ripped off a quick message to him.

Dear James,

I'm a fellow in forensic pathology at the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner in North Carolina. I'm researching forensic genealogy and looking for a genealogist to give me a "Genealogy 101" lesson. I located your name from the Association of Professional Genealogists online. I'm in Raleigh, just like you. Please let me know if you'd be willing to answer a few of my questions.

—Sloan Hastings

She included her phone number and logged out of her email. She spent the rest of the morning researching homicides that had been recently solved using online genealogy databases. She made a list of the ten that looked promising and spent three hours after lunch reading and printing articles on each of them. It was midafternoon when her phone buzzed with a text message. She didn't recognize the number but saw when she opened the message that it was James the genealogist.