

CASPERSEN BEACH
A Wrongful Conviction Mystery
By Janet Heijens

Chapter 1

Maggie, 1994

Gator stopped checking his hairy legs for ticks to squint at the children playing under the fishing pier. “Which one is it this time, Mags?”

“The baby.”

The little one, her arms crusted in sand, sat in her soggy diapers shoveling globs of wet sand into a plastic bucket. The older child stood knee-deep in the Gulf of Mexico, shrieking with laughter every time a wave lifted her to her toes. A deep crease formed on Maggie’s brow.

Cutting through the indistinct chatter in her head, she turned back to Gator.

“What did you say?”

“I said she don’t look nothing like that photo you showed me.”

Maggie stared at the child. She was about the same age as her own little girl when they took her away. And her hair, yellow as corn silk, was exactly like Poppy’s. A chorus of voices sang in her head.

Perfect, perfect, perfect.

Maggie mumbled a reply.

Gator went to work inspecting his dirty feet. “Are you talkin’ to me or are you havin’ one of them conversations with your imaginary friends?”

As Maggie watched, the children ran from the water’s edge and plopped down on a large beach blanket covered with Disney princesses. Their mother, her rings flashing in the sun,

gestured toward the restaurant at the end of the fishing pier. She then turned and trudged through the soft sand, leaving the kids alone.

Maggie tugged on the knit cap she wore whenever she left camp. "I said she's perfect."

With a cry of victory, Gator pulled a tick from between his toes. A bead of blood oozed onto his thumb. He cracked the insect between his ragged fingernails. Wiping his fingers on his khaki shorts, he said, "You reckon that blood is mine or the tick's?"

"I want that baby."

A blast of sour breath filled her nose as Gator laughed. "She ain't yours, Mags."

Now that the girls were sitting on the blanket she could see the older one was about ten while the baby was not a baby at all but a toddler with a full mouth of teeth. The ten-year-old threw a handful of sand on the little one's leg. Tears followed. From the corner of her eye, Maggie saw the mother running back from the restaurant clutching two ice cream cones. Going directly to her sobbing daughter, she handed her one. Appeased, the child grinned and took a lick.

That night Maggie lay on top of her sleeping bag next to Gator. Moonlight seeped through the nylon roof over their head casting eerie shadows across the sharp features of Gator's narrow face. He snored, sucking in great gulps of air, his open mouth revealing a gap where a rotting tooth recently broke off. While she watched, Gator scratched his crotch.

Maggie sighed. While he left much to be desired, Gator was not as bad as some men she had been with and better than most. His greatest asset was the blue tent they called home. They lived in a wooded camp which they shared with a half-dozen other homeless people. For now at least, Gator's presence offered Maggie some protection. She knew the time would come when

one of the other men would try something. As a precaution she kept an old fishing knife sharp by honing it on the sand and stored it under her pillow.

The hum of voices in her head kept Maggie awake. After tossing and turning for a few hours she jabbed Gator in the side with her elbow.

“Hey,” Gator grumbled. “Hey! What’d you wake me for? I was havin’ a real nice dream.”

“I’m going crazy thinking about that little girl.”

“You already crazy, Mags.”

Maggie ripped the pillow out from under his head. He rose up on one elbow and glared at her.

“What is wrong with you, woman?”

“Nothing that having another baby won’t fix.”

Gator gave her a wicked grin. “You want a baby? I’ll give you one right here, right now.”

“No.” Maggie shoved him away. “I want the one on the beach.”

Gator studied her face. “You serious, ain’t you?”

“I am.”

He sat up and fumbled in his backpack for a cigarette. Striking a match, he drew the smoke into his lungs.

Maggie studied him. Gator was a physical wreck, underweight, lice infested and covered with scabs. But one thing was sure. His military training gave him skills that would come in handy for what she had in mind.

“Well, are you going to help me or not?”

“Stealing a kid is serious business, Mags. We can’t just walk up and grab her. Someone would see us for sure.” Gator let the cigarette burn down to the filter before speaking again.

“Besides, what makes you think they’ll come back to the beach any time soon?”

“I’ve been watching them all week. They arrive at ten each day. Around noon their mother gives them sandwiches on the blanket and leaves them alone while she buys ice cream.”

“Let me think on this a minute.”

The minute and more went by before Gator spoke again. “Did you see the jewelry on that woman? Plenty of money there, I reckon. How much you figure she’d pay to get her kid back?”

Maggie sat up and slapped his arm. “I don’t want money. I want the little girl.”

“Can’t rush into this thing. Gotta work out a few details first.”

Maggie felt a glimmer of hope. “So, you’ll do it?”

The corner of Gator’s mouth turned up in a sneer. “I been waiting my whole life for something like this to come along.”

Maggie recognized the glint in his eye. He was up to something, of that she was sure. She did not trust him for one minute but as long as he stole the child for her she did not care.

Wrapping her arms around Gator she buried her face in his neck. In her excitement the voices in her head retreated to the corners of her mind. Maggie could still hear them—they were never far away—but for now at least, she could ignore their whispered warnings.

As the first rays of sun filtered through the blue tent, Maggie woke to the trumpeting sound of Gator’s snoring. After a breakfast of peanut butter crackers and beer, she stuffed a bar of soap and her toothbrush into the pocket of her loose-fitting dress. Maggie slipped on her knit cap, tugging it down tight before heading to the public restroom on the beach. An hour later she

returned to the camp to find Gator still sound asleep. Grabbing her sketchbook and a half-empty box of charcoals from her rusted shopping cart, she left. In the cloying mid-summer heat, her dress soon grew damp with sweat.

Maggie found a spot at the edge of the dunes with a clear view of the fishing pier. Pelicans dove into the water head first, plucking their catch from the Gulf. A group of sandpipers scurried along the sea foam. Except for an older couple sitting on beach chairs with their feet buried in the warm sand, Maggie was alone.

The young family arrived a few minutes before ten. The mother, struggling under the burden of beach bags and umbrellas, pointed to their usual spot on the sand. When the older girl kicked off her flip flops and ran ahead, the toddler followed. Their mother bent down to scoop up the abandoned sandals. She soon caught up to the girls who stood at the water's edge, cooling their burning feet. With a puff of breath, the mother blew the bangs off her forehead and spread the Disney blanket a safe distance from the rising tide.

Maggie opened her sketchbook and found an empty page. Selecting a stubby charcoal from the box, she began to frame the scene. She roughed out the figure of the mother setting up an umbrella while the children pulled their beach toys out of the bag. When Maggie looked up, the little one grabbed a bucket and ran on her short, chubby legs back to the water's edge. For a moment Maggie sat frozen with the charcoal poised above her sketchbook. After a few beats she moved it to the far edge of the paper to capture the child she already thought of as her own.

Voices raged in Maggie's head. She tried to concentrate, fighting to stay focused on her work. Someone cleared his throat and she looked up to see her old friend, Sam standing before her. His lined face broke into a grin. Something about that grin reminded Maggie of her father.

Though she did not know exactly how old Sam was, she figured he was about the same age her father would be if he were still alive.

She returned Sam's smile. "You're blocking my light."

With creaking knees, Sam dropped down next to her. After studying the drawing in her lap he said, "Nice. You made her nose a little too small, though."

Making the adjustment, she said, "I was hoping to see you this morning. There's something I want to tell you."

Sam glanced in the direction of the children. "What are you up to, Mags?"

Unable to contain her excitement Maggie giggled. "See that little girl? I'm going to be her new mother."

"You can't be serious."

Maggie frowned. "Why not?"

"Where will you go? You can't raise a child in that camp of yours, that's for sure. They'll come and take her away. The same way they took Poppy."

"Not this time."

"You know they will."

"Stop talking like that. Don't you want me to be happy?"

"Of course I do. How long have we known each other?"

"I don't know. A long time."

"Then you know I only want what's best for you. You may not like what I have to say but I'm telling you, this is a mistake."

"I don't have to listen to you!"

The old woman sitting with her husband turned at the sound of her raised voice.

Maggie brandished her charcoal at her. “What are you looking at?”

Nudging her husband, the woman stood and dragged her chair several yards away.

Maggie looked down at her drawing. An angry black slash ran across the page.

“Now see what you made me do.”

Sam pushed himself up from the sand. “No good will come from this, Mags.”

Chapter 2

Cate, 2017

Before I begin, let me make one thing perfectly clear. I never intended to spend my so-called golden years working Detective Geri Garibaldi's cold cases. But when Geri called to tell me there was a disturbing development in a murder she investigated decades ago, I knew two things were about to happen. One, she was going to ask for my help. And two, I would say yes. Again.

Geri and I first locked horns when my nephew, Ben Shepherd persuaded me to get involved with one of his cases. Ben is my sister's pride and joy, a hot shot criminal lawyer who specializes in wrongful convictions. Geri was the homicide detective assigned to the case he was working. As things turned out, she had sent an innocent man to prison. To her credit, Geri swallowed her pride and worked with us to right the wrong. Now, only one year later she was back in my life.

With my phone pressed to my ear, I listened to Geri spin her story about the long-ago murder of a little girl. After three months in a shallow grave, nature took a terrible toll on Savannah Troy's body. Her remains yielded no clue as to who or what killed her. Yet the prosecuting attorney built a convincing case against a man named Randy Cousins. In his final statement, the prosecutor played on the emotions of the jury, demanding justice for the murdered child. Following a short deliberation, the jury's foreman stood with tears running down his cheeks. At the words, *We the jury find Randy Cousins guilty*, the mother of the victim collapsed to the floor. There wasn't a dry eye in the place.

When I asked Geri to get to the point of her story, she paused a beat before answering. “I have a bad feeling about this one, Cate. I’m beginning to have doubts. Randy Cousins may have been wrongfully convicted.”

At the thought of another innocent man behind bars, my pulse quickened in anger. Still, I kept my voice devoid of emotion. “You know I’m retired from the law. If Cousins is looking for legal assistance, I suggest you put him in touch with Ben. His firm specializes in that sort of thing.”

“Cousins isn’t asking. He doesn’t even know about Margaret Blue’s dying confession.”

“Who is Margaret Blue?”

“It’s a long story, too long to explain over the phone. Let’s meet at that restaurant on the beach tomorrow.”

“Sharkey’s?”

“That’s the one. We can talk about this over lunch.” With a click, she was gone.

While I sat looking at the phone, my cat, Rascal stared at me, the tip of his tail flicking back and forth. I put the phone down and reached for a box of treats. “I guess it won’t kill me to listen.”