

THE SAINTS OF THE LOST AND FOUND

By T.M. Causey

EXCERPT

CHAPTER 1

I see lost things.

The first lost item I remember seeing was a woman's red shoe. It was a Chinese red stiletto that turned out to be a missing murder weapon. The victim was a man I had never met and would never know. I was six years old when I saw it, and the shoe was more than two thousand miles away, squirreled beneath a rotting house in the southernmost tip of snowy Nova Scotia. I had never been to Nova Scotia. In all of the years since, when I was on the run, Nova Scotia never even made my list of places to go, one of the few to hold that distinction.

Come to think of it, I've never bought a pair of red stilettos either.

The murderer had made the innocent mistake of brushing past me while I was on a family vacation at a third-rate beach near Biloxi. This was long before the casinos elbowed their way onto the beach and displaced the ragged mom-and-pop hotels and rundown burger joints squatting there, before I knew we were a family of gifters feeding off easy marks.

Six-year-old me was a scrawny little blond with a crisscrossing of scars on my arms, legs, and torso, still reddish from a car accident that I blessedly did not remember. The only other sign of the tragedy was a cast on my right arm from the broken wrist I'd suffered when I landed—after being thrown through the windshield. We had traveled to Biloxi to escape winter, only to find it was still winter even there, though warmer, I believe, than wherever we'd been before. The beach was deserted and the wind that blew in salty gusts off the Gulf of Mexico chilled me to the bone. Still, I had begged to be allowed to go outside, where there was space and sky.

A plastic bag wrapped and taped over my cast kept it from getting wet or dirty as I piled sand into a pail to make a castle, building a fantasy world in which people were happy, one half-packed bucket at a time. Mom—or maybe it was my big brother, Latham, I can't recall—sunned a few yards away.

I was just about to top off a turret on my castle when a woman in red swept by me, and the image of a shoe—brilliant in Technicolor glare and hyper-saturated colors—curled towards me, wafting behind her like smoke drafting in the wake of a fast-moving train. The scent of piney woods and snow followed the draft, overpowering the salt air and the coconut tang of the Hawaiian Tropic sunblock Latham had insisted I wear to protect my pale skin and new scars. I remember feeling surprised when the image came in so clear, accompanied by a sense of urgency that someone needed to know what I knew.

Of course, that was before I understood things like *murder*, or why the image bore down on me like a warhead that had acquainted itself with a new target. I only recall the wracking pain as the loss flung its image-shrapnel into my brain. Thankfully, the pain dissipated almost as fast as it hit me, and being a helpful child, I rushed over to impart what I knew to the woman obviously walking away.

She seemed shocked. Then embarrassed. She thanked me, gave me a quarter, and smiled as she walked away.

Later that evening, she tried to drown me in the hotel swimming pool.

To this day, I do not remember drowning. They say you often don't remember the details accompanying a horrific trauma, but I've been told—maybe by my parents, maybe the doctors—that I was playing near the edge of the pool when I was supposed to be in the hotel room. Latham was flirting with some girl with dimples, distracted from watching me as my parents had instructed when he suddenly realized he had lost track of where I'd scooted off to. He found me floating face down in the swimming pool. Witnesses later placed the woman in red at the pool just minutes before Latham found me.

It was the first time my brother saved my life.

It would not be the last.

And I swear to you that I did not know then what I had already cost him.

Standing in the Greyhound Bus Station in Colorado Springs, I was grateful for the cool breeze that made the long-sleeved hoodie hiding my scars not look out of place in the dead of summer. I was also uneasy. My thirtieth birthday had been the day before, and it had come and gone and Latham, who had never missed a holiday or weekly check-in, hadn't called. He had not wanted me in Chicago to start with, much less working for the FBI, and I knew he was upset with me. *For me*. It wasn't like my brother to be petty or vindictive, but I knew that my attachment to the feds and the Little Princess Killer case had tried his patience. He knew I'd run away three weeks ago, but he'd gone radio silent since instead of slapping at me with a plain old *I told you so* or *it's about damned time*. Maybe I'd missed his call when I was crossing the high plains of Kansas, known for its lousy cell reception.

I did not have anywhere I was headed in particular. Call it self-preservation, the way the press had, since they were set on eviscerating my reputation. It really didn't matter that I was running so I could not do any more damage.

My photo was still making the evening news, along with reports of bogus sightings of me in various North American cities. I guess I shouldn't have been surprised. When you're a freak who can find lost things—except when a little girl needs you to find her—people aren't going to let you go easily.

The tang of the orange juice I was sipping helped me focus on taste and ignore the images rolling off my fellow travelers. I stared at the wallboard scrolling destination cities, trying to remain as innocuous as I could as I eyeballed my departure time. A crowd of people milled about, waiting for

the next bus to New Orleans. I tried to ignore the pull the city had for me: Latham wasn't all that far from there in Saint Michael's, a town so small, it barely rated a dot on the map. The problem was, the call to come home had come from Dad, and that meant the odds were too good that my parents were there as well, which is exactly why I had decided on San Francisco and sweet Louise's house; I could count on Louise to hide me out for a week or two, with far fewer prying questions, while I figured out where to run to next.

The ring of my cell phone startled me as if I'd been shot, and several people gave me odd looks, curious, as I turned my back to the room and pulled out the phone, muting the ring. Exactly three people had this number: Latham, my best friend Nate, and Hank, the FBI agent I had abandoned mid-case. After the first few days of my disappearing act, Hank had given up on me answering and stopped calling. The incoming number on the caller ID read, Blocked—so not Latham or Nate. I almost didn't answer.

"Hello?"

"Your brother will die, girl, if you don't get back home now," my grifter dad said without any preamble.

I knew better than to ask Dad how he had gotten this number. He'd never tell the truth. Ten years of frustration, anger, and hurt speared me. Ten years since we've spoken, and this was the first thing he said to me?

"Nice try, but if he's dying, you know I can't change it. You taught us that the hard way, remember?" I answered, calmly, in spite of the panic I felt. *I haven't heard from Latham in two weeks. If Dad isn't lying, what if I never see Latham again?*

"You've gotten better at hiding your emotions," my father said, a reluctant admiration in his voice. I found that suspect as well. Dad never admired anyone. I'd learned early on that to give him a single solitary inch, much less an emotion, was to give him the edge in a game that would end with you pretzeling your best judgment, and, ultimately, giving him whatever it was he had been trying to con out of you in the first place. I'd seen him do it to the best of the best. Hell, for years I had helped him, until I one day realized what our play-acting really was.

"It's pretty easy to have no emotions, Dad. You're lying."

"Am I?" he asked, chuckling. "Well, then, you have nothing to worry about, do you?"

And with that, the bastard hung up. Just like that. I double-checked the face of my phone, but no, he had disconnected, and I knew he had done so without feeling the slightest remorse as to how that would hurt me, *knowing* his prediction of Latham's soon-to-be demise would haunt.

You see, my dad was born with a unique ability, the ability to know when and how any person he met was going to die. To the millisecond. He and my mom had used this ability to pull off grifts all over the country. Sometimes they used the knowledge to simply go in and steal whatever they could while the family was at the hospital, or the morgue, or the cemetery. Far more often, they ran complicated grifts that I rarely understood but which netted my parents hundreds of thousands of tax-free dollars. No grift was too big, or too small for my father. He coned like others breathe. He

might have just lifted a million off a high-stakes target, but if he met you in a McDonald's the next day, he'd be fumbling around, patting his clothes, and giving an Oscar-worthy performance of having forgotten his wallet, just so you'd offer to pay for his choice off the ninety-nine cent menu. Any score made him happy, eyes bright, dimples displayed. He was like the winsome child coaxing just one more chocolate from exhausted grandparents. Irresistible. A master.

A master who was never wrong.

Years ago, he'd told me how I was going to die: at the hands of Jack, the only man I have ever loved.

Still, he had to be lying this time. Latham could not be dying. Nate would have called if Latham were sick. Hell, Latham would have called, not wanting things to end on a sour note with us. We cared too much for each other to hurt each other on purpose now. Didn't we?

I stepped up to the ticket counter, looking at the schedule for San Francisco and freedom.

"One ticket to New Orleans," I said as I handed over the cash.
