

## Chapter 1

I walked over to the far wall in my office, pulled off the picture of my dad, and stood next to the small window that stared out on the empty streets of Arroyo. Usually in October, this northern California city street would be filled with residents and tourists enjoying our Indian summer weather. But the black clouds had opened up again, drenching the streets in a loud torrent and sending even the locals scattering for cover. God, I hate the rain and three days of it was starting to wear on me.

“I miss you, Dad,” I whispered as I smeared off a tear that had dropped onto the photo.

Today marked the one-year anniversary of his death. In the picture, he was in his police chief uniform, smiling and proud of his position. I put it back on the wall and moved toward my grandfather’s massive oak desk that had sat squarely in the center of the room for the last fifty years. And every day that I occupied his oak swivel chair with its smell of pipe smoke and whiskey, I knew being chief was more than a job, it was fate.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted my lead officer, Sergeant Bob Linden, pacing in front of my door. He was over fifty and portly, with a beer belly and a boyish face he would take to his grave. His light brown hair was soaking wet, and he was wearing that stupid yellow poncho he had donned three days ago and hadn't taken off since.

Bob tapped on the door and I motioned for him to come in.

He flopped down in one of the high-backed leather chairs that stood in front of the desk and an instant puddle appeared on the newly polished hardwood floor.

“I hate the rain,” he muttered as he shook his head, which deposited more water on my floor.

“Me, too.” I sighed, then reached back to the oak credenza behind me, retrieved a towel I used earlier to dry my short blonde hair and threw it at him.

Bob leaned down and wiped up the puddles.

“Joe Garza called, Connie. His fields are flooded,” he said.

“It's been raining for three days. The ground's saturated. Of course his fields are flooded.”

“No, he says this is worse than just rain.”

“Okay, probably one of the levees broke. Let's go check it out.” This was exciting news for Arroyo. My typical outings usually included only rowdy teenagers and an occasional drunk. I slipped on my raincoat, throwing the hood over my head and we left my office. When I opened the station door, I was belted with an onslaught of wind and water. Wrapping the hood tighter around my face, I ran toward my white Ford Explorer patrol vehicle. Bob trailed behind me, cussing under his breath about the rain the entire way.

We jumped in and slammed the car doors at the same time. I glanced at myself in the rearview mirror as I pulled off the hood. A drowned rat came to mind. On the bright side, I wasn't wearing any make-up, or I would have looked like a drowned raccoon. I flipped on the wipers and Bob turned the heater on high.

“By the time it gets warm, Bob, we're going to be at Joe's house.”

“I know, Chief, but maybe I'll dry out a little bit.” He shivered and rubbed his hands in front of the heater vent. “I'm chilled to the bone.”

Joe's farmhouse was only five miles south of town but it was slow going between the weather and the sunken potholes in the road.

The irrigation ditches on both sides were filled to capacity with rushing water, but luckily the road wasn't flooded. Still, if it didn't stop raining soon, more than just Joe's fields would be submerged. Another couple of days and the roads, maybe even part of the town, would be under water. It would be big news for this little town.

Five generations of Davenports had been chief of this town. My great-great-grandfather, Joshua, had helped tame Arroyo, a small town flanked on one side by the Sierra Foothills and the other by rivers and its own man-made lake. He brought law and order to this northern California town and my family had been carrying on ever since. Except for me. At eighteen, I ran like a wild woman out of Arroyo. I went to school at the University, double majored in Criminal Justice and Behavioral Science and enrolled in the Police Academy. Even before I graduated, I was recruited by the FBI. I never looked back. Who'd have thought I would return to take over my family's legacy and have to deal with the excitement of too much rain?

Joe ran out to meet us as we drove through his iron front gate. He was a small, wiry man pushing sixty, wrapped in a black poncho with a pained look on his face. I rolled down the window and he immediately grunted, “It's terrible, Chief.”

“Tell me what happened.”

“I was out checking the fields. All this damn water is ruining my corn.”

I glanced at Bob and nodded. “We hate all this rain, too.”

“My entire crop is under water. It'll never dry out enough to grow.”

Joe's farm covered over fifty acres and I had no idea which were planted in corn.

“We'll take a look, Joe. Where's the field?”

The grimace on his face morphed to a small smile as he sighed and said, “It's another mile down the road and on the left. Thanks, Chief.”

I nodded, gave him my best Chief of Police smile - large grin, lots of teeth and oozing with reassurance. Then I closed my window and drove back to the road. It didn't take us long to spot the field. The crops weren't the only thing flooded; half the road was, too.

“Get the levee map from the glove compartment, will you, Bob?”

“Sure.”

We spread it out on the dashboard in front of us.

I pointed. “Okay, this is the levee that would affect his field. Let's go check it out.”

“That's a half mile walk from the road, Chief. Why don't we go back and I'll fly us over the area? It will be quicker and we can check all the levees at the same time.”

“I'm not getting into an airplane with you in this weather.”

“I've been flying since I was fourteen years old, Chief. The rain isn't coming down that hard anymore. We'll be fine.”

Bob's family owned a small aviation business in Arroyo. It was mostly used for crop dusting and Bob's vacation jaunts. He loved to take his plane and go away for a week at a time, or sometimes just for a day or to have dinner in another town. I knew he had learned to fly before he learned to drive. But it was raining. And I wasn't going to fly in it.

"Let's just walk, Bob. That's why we get the big bucks."

He shook his head. "Yeah, that's why I'm in debt up to my eyeballs."

"No, that's because you like to play the ponies at the race track."

"That's true." He shrugged.

"And the casinos in Vegas and any other town within your flight range."

"That's true, too." He grinned.

"Let's go." I opened my door.

Bob sighed and reluctantly got out of the car.

Thank God the rain had let up a little. But the sky was still black with clouds threatening to open up again. I got a flashlight from the back of my car, and trudged across the field. The water was cold, chilling right through my slacks, double pair of knee high wool socks and straight to my bones. Several times I sank to my knees in the mud. It didn't take long to see where the levee had collapsed and water rushed into Joe's field.

"Let's get back to the car. We need to get a crew out here to sandbag this levee. Joe's going to need some sandbags, too. Any more rain and water will be at his front door."

We slogged back to the patrol car. Water and mud dripped from my pants and boots onto the floor. Bob immediately turned the heater on high and the smell of wet mud permeated the air.

The radio squawked. It had to be Evelyn with more bad news. She was our dispatcher and the wife of Trent, one of my officers, and very pregnant.

I picked up the receiver. "Chief Davenport."

"Hey, Chief," Evelyn said. "I just got a call from the Ramirez farm. Their fields are flooded."

"Okay, we'll check it out." I pointed to the glove compartment. "Let's take a look at that map again, Bob. The Ramirez farm is clear on the other side of town. This broken levee shouldn't be affecting their fields, too."

After studying the map, we went in search of other broken levees. We found three more ten miles north of town. Just sandbagging them wasn't going to fix the problem. There was just too much water and the five day weather forecast was for more showers.

"The whole damn outlying area is going to be flooded within hours," Bob said, shaking the water from the sleeves of his raincoat after we returned from our hike to the latest collapsed levees.

"Give me that map again, Bob." I pointed to a section on the top. "This is the old Turner Bridge, right?"

"Yes."

"Didn't a river used to flow under that bridge?"

"Sure, it dried up over thirty years ago."

I followed the lines in the map. It looked like the river used to dump into Lake Arroyo.

“Could we re-route all that water to the river?”

Bob studied the map, then looked up at me and smiled.

“Yeah, I think we could. Do you think we should call Mayor Benson?”

“And listen to how expensive this will be, how the city budget is stretched too thin now, or how my last payroll included too much overtime?”

Bob shook his head.

“Damn right,” I told him. “Let's just do it. It's always better to ask for forgiveness than permission. Especially when you know the answer is going to be no.”

A quick call to the road crews and they moved out with hundreds of sandbags to re-route the water. As they worked, I remembered playing by that dried-up old river when I was young. The sides had lots of animal burrows, some of them big enough for me and my friends to play hide-and-seek.

Seven hours later, the fields drained, the river ran, and the crops were safe. Thanks to an army of men donned in yellow slickers, using shovels and sandbags to divert the water in the drizzling, sometime onslaught, of miserable rain. All in all, it was a great night's work.

I got home around four in the morning. Cheezy, my calico cat, waited for me at my family's home. Mom had wanted to sell the place after Dad died, but I wouldn't let her. Instead, I bought the house from her and she moved to a small condo in a senior center, with constant activities and weekly trips to the casinos. She's happy and I like having things around me that I grew up with.

I made myself a large cup of peppermint tea, sat on the couch, and stroked Cheezy. She purred and I inhaled the sweet minty aroma of the tea. The heat warmed my chilled limbs.

Cheezy was a great mouser and didn't really need me. I was a great cop and could live without her. It really was the perfect relationship; we each got what we needed, with no real commitment.

Commitment was overrated, I thought, gazing down at Cheezy. Matthew and I had been committed to each other and that hadn't turned out well. I had met him on my first day as an FBI agent. He was dressed in a conservative black suit, white shirt, and solid tie. I assumed he had to be in court but quickly learned that he wore the same attire every day. On another man it would have seemed stuffy, but it complemented his tall, lanky body, intense blue eyes, and no-nonsense attitude. The job was everything to both of us, so we spent hours discussing our cases. We fell in love quickly and complemented each other both at work and in life. While I was excitable and high energy, Matthew was calm and composed. Less than a year later, we were married and my career was on a seemingly unstoppable, fast-track train.

I leaned my head back and remembered the day more than two years ago that marked the beginning of the end - of my career, my marriage, and my sanity.

Two body dump sites attributed to a serial killer dubbed “the Jackal” had been found, one in Centerville, Mississippi and the other in Benson, Oregon. Five shallow graves in each city were found by local hikers. In both cases, the five women had been reported missing in the same week. The bodies showed signs of rape, taser wounds, and a signature large deep slice starting at

the women's collar bones and ending at their pelvises. Now three women were missing in Texas and Matthew asked me to lead an FBI team to track and catch the killer. I hadn't wanted to go.

"Connie, it's a great opportunity for you to head a large-scale investigation," Matthew said, as he massaged the back of my neck.

"But I don't want to go to Texas," I whined. "The weather's hot and humid. And the mosquitoes are as big as vultures." I remembered his response to my complaining. He brushed his lips against my neck, causing the usual warmth to spread through my body.

"So find the killer fast and come back." He turned me around and winked at me with his light blue eyes. "We've got business of our own."

Matthew and I were trying to conceive our first child and we were having a lot of fun in the process. I was actually late by a couple of weeks but it was too soon to try one of those pregnancy tests so I hadn't said anything to him. With my irregular cycle we had already bought and discarded several tests. It made both of us sad when the single blue line appeared rather than a blue plus sign or double blue line. I smiled and touched his face. He grinned, then leaned in and kissed me passionately.

"Is that any way to treat one of the agents you supervise?" I said, laughing, when we finally ended the kiss.

He laughed too, rich and full.

"My other agents don't seem to mind."

I rolled my eyes and flopped down in the leather chair in front of his desk. The bureau had a fit when Matthew and I got married. They didn't want a husband supervising a wife but with our case clear rate substantially higher than any other unit, they didn't want to split it up either.

"Okay, who's going with me?"

Matthew put the Jackal's files in front of me. "I've assigned my best agents, John Carpenter and Sheryl Reynolds, to go with you. I'm also sending William Carlotti as your criminal profiler."

John, Sheryl, and I had worked together on several cases and were good friends. John was imposing, well over six feet, built solidly with broad shoulders, square jaw and judicious brown eyes. He was smart and never missed anything. Sheryl was a wiz on the computer and petite, with an hourglass figure, high cheek bones, small straight nose, and wavy long blond hair. If she wasn't such a nice person, I'd have hated her.

William was the FBI's newest and brightest profiler -- and a total jerk. We had worked together only a few times but we didn't get along. In fact, we disagreed on everything, from the direction of an investigation to what we should order for lunch. Oil and vinegar mixed better.

"Isn't there another profiler available?" I ask, trying to hide the annoyance in my voice, but obviously failing when Matthew arched his eyebrows and frowned.

I drew in a deep breath, then sighed. "William is pompous, arrogant, self-absorbed, and his clothes cost more than two months of my salary. And to top it all off, he thinks he's God's gift to the women of the world."

“The secretaries around here would agree with him, and a few of my agents, too,” Matthew replied, smiling.

I thought about William and all the women who swooned over him. He was taller than me, maybe six four, solidly built with broad shoulders and a narrow waist. His olive skin was probably due more to his Italian ancestry rather than time spent in the sports cars he always rented when we worked together. His crop of wavy jet black hair was thick and his face was round with green eyes that missed nothing. He was a good profiler, I would give him that and I could see how other women found him handsome, but to me he was a big pain in the ass!

“He's the best, Connie, and I want the best with you so you'll be home soon.” Matthew came around his desk and took my hands.

“But not William,” I repeated emphatically. “He and I don't agree on anything and besides, he's a drag to be around.”

Matthew laughed. “Is this because he calls you Constance instead of Connie?”

“How can the man be that bright if he can't remember my name?” I scowled.

Matthew reached back to his desk, lifted the files, and handed them to me.

“Gather your team, go to Texas, find the bad guy, and come home.”

“But what if all the evidentiary clues are wrong and I never find the guy?”

He laughed. It was a standing joke between us. If something went wrong on a case, I always told him the clues were wrong, not me.

“Then fix them and get home.”

I saluted. “Yes sir.”

He wrapped his arms around my waist, pulled me close, and kissed me. I would have savored it longer if I had known it was going to be the last.