

THE TRUE LIES
OF REMBRANDT STONE

**CAST THE FIRST
STONE**

Tristone Media Inc.
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CHAPTER 1

It's the regrets that keep me awake.

The broken hearts, the lives ripped apart. The bitter finales.

The sense that, frankly, it's not finished.

I'm not finished, no matter how much I try to lie to myself.

With every crime, a clock starts ticking. A forty-eight hour fuse that ignites, chewing away at the evidence. It begins with the victim and from that moment, time gnaws at every scrap of evidence. Eyewitness memories fade, clues are scattered to the wind by the daily congestion of life.

The colder the trail grows, the lower the likelihood of finding the perpetrators. This accounts for hundreds of thousands of cold cases in dusty file rooms and backup databases around the world.

It also accounts for the fist in my gut every time I have to face the bereaved with a despairing update. And, for too long, it accounted for the indentation in a stool down at the Gold Nugget where Jericho Bloom started pouring the minute I darkened the door.

Days past, but the cases still haunt me, some waking me in the still of night, Eve's sleeping body like an anchor in the darkness,

tethering me to the now. Sometimes she too, awakens, and knowing, finds me and urges the ghosts to quiet, tucking them back inside.

They never stay silent for long. The whispers always return.

What if?

What if I could go back to the moment, the beginning of the forty-eight hour window? What if I had been smarter or faster? Maybe everything would be different.

But you can't change the past.

None of this is any consolation to the seven-year-old cherub standing in front of me.

"I'm sorry. Gomer's been missing over a month." I'm using my most stoic, former homicide Inspector voice, despite the pull of those big blue eyes staring at me. "I don't have any leads—"

"But Daddy, you're a detective." My accuser has curly, golden blonde hair and the way she stares at me, hands on her hips, so much belief in her eyes, I am undone. "You know how to find things."

Except for Eve, standing in the door frame, her arms folded over her chest, I would make a thousand promises, swear on my soul to unearth the ratty bear I gave Ashley three years ago. Just a gift shop souvenir, a desperation offering because, in the chaos of the moment I'd forgotten her birthday. Of course, out of all the things I gave her, this stupid bear has to be the one she cherishes.

Eve quirks an eyebrow. Her curly auburn hair is tied up, as tidy as she can make it, but corkscrews fall from behind her ears and for a moment, the swift memory of earlier this morning, the softness of her hair between my fingers, derails me.

"Please, Daddy. I miss him. It's all I want for my birthday—Gomer back."

Of course it is.

Ashley inherited her mother's stubbornness, something that has probably kept her mom and me together, a chronic commitment-phobe, this long. She too raises an eyebrow, the expression of an only child who, more than likely, knows the power she has over me. The tiny scar just above her forehead where she ran into a pole at the park is just fading, but the memory of all that blood can still make me nauseous.

There is nothing I won't do for her, and we all know that.

She's wearing a dress—refuses anything else—and isn't moved by the voices gathering in the back yard.

Answers. We all want them, and yes maybe Eve is right—Ash is too old to need a teddy bear. But I'm her father. "Okay, baby. I'll find Gomer, I promise."

I hear a huff in the corner, and I catch Eve rolling her eyes even as she turns away.

But I see the smirk, the I-knew-it grin.

Once a detective, always a detective, perhaps. Something I should probably get around to admitting.

"Thank you, Daddy!" I get a quick hug before Ash heads downstairs.

I'm not even sure where to look for the confounded bear, but I do a cursory walk-through of Ashley's bedroom, stopping at the window to peer down at the street. A vehicle has pulled up to the curb, and I spot Silas O'Roarke getting out of his SUV with his daughter. It parches me a little to know that Eve invited him, but she doesn't burn bridges. And, with Eve, a party isn't a party unless everyone is included.

I paste on my game face and head downstairs. I've thrown a sheet over the construction debris in the dining room, but the place hangs heavy with the scent of sawdust and stain.

Eve is waiting for me in the kitchen, slicing a watermelon. Outside, the handful of the younger guests are playing on the swing set I spent all of last weekend, and then some, building. A couple parents—neighbors—are helping themselves to the adult beverages. I step up to my wife, pressing a kiss to the nape of her neck, the memory of her scent still swirling inside me.

“I’m going to chop a finger off if you keep doing that,” she says, glancing up at me.

I reach around and grab a piece of the fruit. She points her weapon at me, turning in my arms. Hazel-green eyes, soft curves despite her toned body—the woman is tenacious about her morning runs—and a tolerance for my eccentricities that still astounds me.

I’m not sure how I got this lucky, but a guy with my history shouldn’t ask too many questions.

I kiss her, quickly, even as she puts a hand to my chest, pushes me away. “Hey, Silas,” she says over my shoulder.

I turn, holding out a hand.

Her former assistant, now armed with his own prestigious title, meets my grip.

“Rembrandt.” He gives me a small nod, but no smile.

“Silas.” Two could play that game. He’s never been fond of me. Told me flat out once that I’m not good enough for Eve. I guess we agree on that.

“Play nice you two.” Eve uses the tone that earned her the August Vollmer Forensic Science award, and waves her knife. “Don’t make me use this.”

“You’re scaring me,” I say as Silas herds his daughter—Cyra—to the backyard.

“Somebody should.” Eve hands me the bowl of watermelon.

Maybe I should be scared, because Eve really can handle herself. The product of being the only daughter of a cop, and surrounded by brothers.

I take the bowl outside, into the heat and sunshine. Overhead, the sky is a brilliant blue, a perfect Memorial Day weekend, the redolence of cut grass and lilacs in the fresh Minnesota breeze.

Not a day for darkness, for memories, the kind that could cut a man to his soul, so I force away the familiar, murky ache and smile for the gaggle of little girls and their parents.

Why remember anyway? I have too much good in my life to let the past steal it.

At least that's what I tell myself.

My neighbor Russell—former lineman for the Vikings, and current attorney—lifts his sweating Stella to me even as he continues his conversation with Gia, from across the street. Gia is dark-haired, petite, curvy and newly single, separated from Alex who moved out in a loud domestic event two weeks ago. Eve and I watched from our porch, her hand on my arm. I wasn't sure if she was holding me back or waiting to push me into the fight.

Frankly, I wasn't sure myself. My instincts are a little off after three years away from the force.

Russell is leaning down, his attention back on Gia and I fear there's more to the conversation than I want to know.

Perhaps my instincts aren't as off as I think.

Silas has helped himself to a beer in the cooler—he's used to Eve's expectations by now—and pops the top with his ring as he comes back to stand by me. "They grow up too fast," he says, referring to Cyra and Ashley and the rest of the first graders. "How's the book coming?"

Small talk, because he's a bright guy, a crime scene investigator and one look at my house suggests an answer.

Apparently, writer's block can't be solved by remodeling the kitchen, building out the back deck or re-tiling the fireplace in our 1930s craftsman.

"It's coming," Silas is the last person I'm about to let dig away at my choices. That critique, I leave to Burke.

"Keeping busy?" I counter. "Lots of crime in Minnetonka these days?"

I mean it as a joke, sorta, but I can almost hear Eve in my ears, don't start. Some people want the suburban life.

"Enough," Silas says, his mouth tightening at the corners. We're opposites of the same coin, perhaps. He's a sandy blonde to my dark brown, although his hair is cut short, and yeah, I'm starting to resemble a clichéd version of reclusive author, my hair long and curly behind my ears. Eve can nearly grab it into a ponytail. She doesn't hate it, though—or at least I don't think so, given the way she plays with it when we watch T.V. Silas is about my build, six foot flat-footed, and although I have a couple years on him, I've kept up my workouts. I could still take him in a pickup game.

Or in other games.

Silas's gaze flickers to Cyra and Ash, comparing, maybe, the way it all worked out. I see old stories, old recriminations rising in his pale green eyes.

If he'd had his way, Eve would be living in some modern rambler on an acre lot overlooking a biking trail in some oak-shaded safe suburban neighborhood.

Instead, she landed a vintage fixer upper with character, situated just a few blocks off Lake Calhoun, in the shadow of Minneapolis, on a postage stamp lot.

With me.

I walk over to the cooler to grab a cold beer.

Ash is swinging, her pumps arcing her high into the wind, and I want to tell her to be careful. The words are almost out when a scream—followed by a word the seven-year-olds shouldn't hear—turns me on my heel.

A crash, and I'm at the door, barreling inside.

Eve is standing at the sink, her hands in front of her, deflecting the spray of a broken faucet, the shards of a glass bowl littering the basin. "Rem! You told me you fixed this!"

I move her out of the way—the spray hits me full on, soaking through my T-shirt, my jeans—and I cup my hand over the torrent, even as I try and shunt the flow. "Turn off the water under the sink!"

"What—?"

I grab a towel and shove it over the spray, deflecting it down and hit my knees, digging out the cleaning products that clutter the cupboard before finding the shut off valve.

The spray dies and I sit for a moment in a puddle on our new wood floor. Eve is standing over me, and she's not amused, the water turning her white blouse nearly transparent, her hair dripping. She picks up a towel and presses it into the ends of her hair.

"I'm a writer, not a plumber."

She rolls her eyes, and that hurts just a little, but she offers me her hand. "You're a detective. Figure out why my faucet is busted."

Like daughter, like mother. "The rubber gasket on the seal is leaking." I hear the doorbell and add, "You should go change." I'm thinking of Silas, but I'm not keen on Russell getting a glimpse of the goods either.

She tosses the towel in the sink and I head to the door.

My step hiccups just a second before I open it because I recognize the man through the side lights.

Tall, skin the color of a starless night, bald, and by his stance, still training weekly at Quincy's. He's staring at the door as if he'd like to take it out with his X-ray vision. He's holding a file box almost like a shield.

This will be fun.

I open the door. "Burke."

"Sorry, I'm late."

He's not on the list, but of course Eve would have invited him. He offers me a smile, and I know he's trying. But you don't partner with a guy for nearly twenty years without knowing his tells, when and why he'd flinch, and most importantly, the ability to read the disappointment in his eyes.

Frankly, I've sort of gotten used to it.

"No problem."

He sets the box down on a bench by the door. I recognize the handwriting, the frayed edges of the cardboard, the warped fit of the cover, and can't help but react. "What is that doing here?"

"It showed up at the station with a note for you." Burke lifts a shoulder. "Part of his estate, I guess."

Police Chief John Booker, having the last word. Of course. "I thought the files were destroyed when we scanned them into the database."

Burke glances at the box and for a second, we stand in silence, the memory of John Booker between us. Regrets and what-ifs and the burning is back inside my gut.

Oddly, and maybe for the first time ever, I'm saved by my parents strolling up the walk.

"Rembrandt," my father says, landing on our wide porch. He still carries himself like the farmer-slash-builder he is, and I'm sure we'll later have a dissection of my current projects. Wide-shouldered, his hair now fully gray and thinning, Vincent Stone bears

the scars in his countenance of holding us all together—well, at least my mother—during the years of wondering, a decade of grief and anger and questions that held us hostage.

This week is the unfortunate anniversary of the discovery of my brother's remains, twenty-three years ago, and I can see it lurking behind my mother's smile as she arrives. She still walks with a cane, sometimes struggles to form words, the right side of her face sags, always at half-pout.

In this way, it's always with us, Mikey's murder, embedded in our bones. But like good Minnesotans, we don't talk about it, tuck it away along with the anger, the frustration.

But sometimes, there's just nothing to say.

"Mom," I say and give her a hug. Her bones are fragile beneath my touch, and she's lost more weight, her crazy no salt diet stripping the fat from her bones. "You look good," I add, because that's our way.

She pats my cheek, knows that I'm lying. "Where's my favorite granddaughter?" Her words are slushy, but we're all used to that and I understand her perfectly. Her favorite granddaughter. It's just a funny thing she says—because we all know Ash is her only granddaughter.

"In the backyard. Waiting for you." I wink and it feels like we've put ourselves back together, that we're going to be okay, for one more day.

My dad comes in and I know I should mention the fact that it's his birthday week too. But we long ago stopped celebrating anything—birthdays, Christmas, Thanksgiving. After all, what did we have to be thankful for?

They head into the backyard and it's then that I turn and, on a crazy whim I know I'll pay for, I rip free the packing tape on the box and peek inside one edge of the cover.

Inside, nearly packed to the rim, lay files and files of my old cases. Cold cases. Failures, frustrations, and everything I hated about my job.

The cases that won't let me sleep.

Thank you, John Booker. In his last vengeful act, he gave them to me. Punishment for not being the guy he wanted me to be, maybe.

I pick up the box (the last thing I want is for someone to root through these) and head into my office, a room at the front of the house, away from the chaos of the kitchen.

There's a smell to my office—coffee, old books, the leather from a chair Eve bought right after I left the force—that should inspire me, I'm sure of it. I even have the cover of my first—and currently, only, book—on my wall. Success, right?

I'm starting to think that first blockbuster is a fluke, a literary anomaly. I'm sure my agent thinks this too, but his emails to me are full of how's that new ending going, and we have publishers interested.

Everyone, trying to keep me from wallowing in the dark truth.

I blew it, and big, and there's no going back to the life I had. The career, the legacy that I was good, painfully good, at.

What's left is my screen saver swirling against a blackness, hiding an empty page.

I set the box on my desk—the first table Eve and I bought together—careful not to bump the mouse, then I leave. Shut the door.

Because that's where the stories, and the memories, and even the failures should stay. Locked under the cover of darkness.

I turn back to the party, the wounds fresh and pulsing in my gut, now keenly reminded of the brutal truth.

Try as I might, there are no happy endings.



Susan May Warren is the USA Today bestselling, Christy and RITA award-winning author of more than eighty novels whose compelling plots and unforgettable characters have won acclaim with readers and reviewers alike. The mother of four grown children, and married to her real-life hero for over 30 years, she loves travelling and telling stories about

life, adventure and faith.

For exciting updates on her new releases, previous books, and more, visit her website at www.susanmaywarren.com.



James L. Rubart is 28 years old, but lives trapped inside an older man's body. He's the best-selling, Christy Hall of Fame author of ten novels and loves to send readers on mind-bending journeys they'll remember months after they finish one of his stories. He's dad to the two most outstanding sons on the planet and lives with his amazing wife on a small lake in

eastern Washington.

More at <http://jameslrubart.com/>



David Curtis Warren is making his literary debut in these novels, and he's never been more excited. He looks forward to creating more riveting stories with Susie and Jim, as well as on his own. He's grateful for his co-writers, family, and faith, buoying him during the pandemic of 2020, and this writing and publishing process.

