

A CHRISTIAN STONE THRILLER

SEAT
3A

ERIC SUGRUE



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First Edition

CHAPTER ONE

It's a perfect day for flying. A seasonal fifty-seven degrees. Cloudless sky. No wind to speak of. My fellow passengers are chatting a mile a minute on their phones as we stroll down the accordion tunnel connecting the terminal and the plane. Their spirits are high, and why not? Soon enough they'll be sipping frozen drinks in Miami Beach.

I'd be right there with them if it weren't for the fact that I'm already a bit hungover. That's the danger of owning the restaurant where you do your drinking: It's easy to forget that you're draining your own supply.

A cabin attendant whose name tag reads GENNA greets me as I step on board.

"Nice to see you again," she says, nodding to the loyalty stickers decorating my shoulder bag. "Let me know if I can do anything to make your flight more enjoyable."

There's a faint pulsing in my temples, and my tongue keeps sticking to the roof of my mouth. "I'd love a bottle of water," I say.

I stuff my bag under the seat in front of me and settle down beside the window. This is my third trip to Miami in as many months. My brother Michael moved down there roughly a decade ago. My biggest regret is that I didn't begin visiting him right away.

A CHRISTIAN STONE THRILLER

For years, my fear of flying kept me anchored to a one-hundred-mile radius around Wilmington, Delaware. Then Michael totaled his Jeep, and I had to be at the University of Miami Hospital ASAP. The only seat available on the next plane out was 3A. I took two Xanax and white-knuckled the armrests. And a miracle happened: 100,000 pounds of metal successfully defied gravity. Soon after, Michael's collapsed lung righted itself and 3A became my safe zone. As long as I'm sitting in 3A, nothing bad can happen.

Since Michael's accident, Miami has been my second home. I bought a one-bedroom condo three buildings down from his place. The small balcony has the kind of ocean view that brochures are made of. Sitting out there with my morning cup of coffee, I feel the backlog of sixteen-hour days melt away. And now I get to see my brother whenever I want without cramping his independence or mine.

Genna brings my bottle of water. I guzzle half of it in one go, and my tongue turns instantly more nimble. The dull throb in my skull grows a bit duller. If I can catch a few winks, I might just arrive in Miami feeling like new.

A woman plops herself down next to me, then flashes a neighborly smile. She's wearing a Phillies hat, and her canvas bag has the words *Betsy Ross House* embroidered in red, white, and blue across one side. A tourist on her way home, no doubt bursting with stories to tell. I'd guess she's in her early forties, like me. Tall and toned and still carrying traces of the tan she must have brought with her from Florida to Philly. Normally I'd be eager to chat, but not today.

Today it's more than just the hangover itself; it's my reason for being hungover. Quinn left me. Our yearlong cohabitation went bust last Friday. Her parting words were "I didn't move in with you so that I could live alone." Those sixteen-hour days took their toll. She was offered a job in Chicago and couldn't see any reason to turn

SEAT 3A

it down. I didn't want her to go. I don't want her to be gone. But my hours will only get longer with a new location opening next spring, and I'm not about to make promises I can't keep.

"Beautiful fall day," my seatmate says. "We don't really get seasons in Florida."

I nod, then deflect her icebreaker by sliding a manila folder from the side pocket of my computer bag. *Sorry, can't talk. I'm Christian Stone, important businessman reading important papers.* It feels slightly less self-involved than the truth: *I'm Christian Stone, currently lovesick and unavailable.*

The important papers I'm pretending to read are specs for the new restaurant. It didn't help my case with Quinn that the latest installment of Big Ocean Bar & Grill will be located on the ground floor of a Dax Morelli property.

"The man's a thug," she said. "He belongs in jail."

"Those are just rumors," I told her.

But as rumors go, they're pretty compelling. Dax has spent the last half decade buying up most of Wilmington. Nobody knows for sure where the money comes from, but the loudest whispers suggest mafia ties. Dax, with his slicked-back hair and impeccably tailored Armani suits, does his best to look the part. Still, his latest venture seems more than legit; it seems downright well-intentioned. Morelli Capital is revitalizing three square blocks in the heart of downtrodden Wilmington. Planned renovations include a public arts project, a performance complex modeled on Lincoln Center, solar-powered affordable housing, and a slew of sleek new storefronts. Big Ocean will claim a 5,000-square-foot space in the lobby of a sprawling, state-of-the-art convention center. Yes, Dax stands to make a lot of money, but it's hard to argue that the people of Wilmington won't profit too.

A CHRISTIAN STONE THRILLER

The cabin doors draw closed, and then the passengers all make a show of ignoring the flight attendants while they demonstrate vital safety procedures. Once that's out of the way, our captain jumps on the intercom and declares that we're ready for takeoff, an announcement that always sounds to me like a threat. I glance over at my seatmate. I must have been wrong about her eagerness to chat. She's donning a pair of noise-canceling headphones and has her arms folded across her chest. She wants to be left alone, like me. I wonder what else we have in common. Maybe I was too hasty. Maybe I should strike up a conversation when the snack tray comes around. But I know that I won't. I'm still in that phase where talking to other women only reminds me that I'm not talking to Quinn.

We start down the runway, then pick up speed. The vibration kicks in—that feeling like you're fusing with your seatback as the plane tries to suck you out through its underbelly. I grip my armrest and force myself to look out the window. Sitting in 3A is only the first of my survival rites. Between liftoff and cruising altitude, I have to keep my eyes glued to the earth. I have to mentally catalog every receding object. If I face my fear, then it can't sneak up on me. No pilot would dare crash while I'm holding vigil.

As we begin our ascent, I see a golf cart ferrying ground crew back to the terminal. A US Postal Service plane coming in for its landing. A canopy of red-and-gold leaves at the edge of the airport. A traffic jam on the highway. Rooftops that must quake as we pass overhead. Boats docked at a marina on the Schuylkill River. Tires and oil drums and plastics of every size and shape gathered on the bank just beyond the marina.

And then, lying atop the reeds in the middle of all that trash, I spot an object I'm slow to identify. Something long and elastic and curvy. I press my face against the glass like I'm trying to zoom in.

SEAT 3A

Or maybe I just can't believe what I'm seeing. It's . . . a man. A man wearing a tent-sized Eagles jersey. Except my eyes *must* be playing tricks on me, because who would lounge out in the middle of all that debris? And who would contort their limbs like that, with one arm wrapped awkwardly around his head and his legs splayed? I squint and crane my neck, searching for a better angle. But then the nose of the plane jolts skyward, and the body's gone.

That's what it was—not a living being, but a body. A dead man washed up on shore with the beer bottles and soup cans and other detritus. As though someone threw him away. My head is pounding, and my vision has blurred more than once since the alarm went off this morning, but I know what I saw. A dead man in an Eagles jersey. There isn't a doubt in my mind.

CHAPTER TWO

Or is there? Could I really have made out a body from so many feet above the earth? Then there's the question of my state of mind. No one who knows me would say I've been doing my clearest thinking lately. Mistaking a green Hefty trash bag for a corpse in an Eagles jersey would fit right in with my recent blunders. In addition to drinking more than usual, I've lost my temper with staff, shown up late to meetings I called, let my voicemail sit full for days on end. I've been generally unavailable to anyone who has my best interests at heart. That's why I decided to take a full week off. A rare extended break. Claire, vice president of Big Ocean and my closest confidant, says she's never seen me so distracted. She stopped short of calling me a liability. "Get your money's worth out of that condo," she told me. "Come back refreshed." Translation: Come back when you have your shit together.

Since I can't trust my own judgment, I'll have to rely on someone else's. I hesitate, then lean forward and tap the shoulder of the woman in 2A. She turns and peers over the back of her seat.

"Yes, dear?" she asks.

She has short gray hair and deep smile lines. The "dear" is more genuine than condescending. She strikes me as someone whose

A CHRISTIAN STONE THRILLER

thoughts bend toward kindness, someone whose first instinct is to want to help. I start to answer her, then realize I haven't thought things through. I can't just come out and ask this pleasant stranger if she happened to glimpse a cadaver lying among the trash on the riverbank.

"Sorry to bother you," I tell her, "but I was looking out the window just now, and I thought I saw something strange near the marina. I couldn't quite make it out. I was wondering if maybe you saw something too?"

The question sounds ridiculously vague, even to me. Vague, and also pointless. If she'd spotted a corpse, then she wouldn't be so calm and composed.

She holds her Kindle up for me to see. "Sorry," she says. "My eyes were glued to this thing. I run through cozies like they're candy."

"No worries," I say. "It was probably nothing."

She turns back around. I feel suddenly very alone. *Just drop it, Christian*, I tell myself. But I can't. My body won't let me. There's a tightening in my chest, and my right knee is bouncing up and down like I swallowed a bottle of NoDoz. I need to move, but the seat belt sign above my head is still ordering me to stay put. When it finally goes dim, I free myself and get to my feet. But there's another obstacle blocking my path: 3B's legs. Either she's dead asleep or she's doing a great job of pretending. Her jaw's hanging open, and she's making a high-pitched whistling noise with every exhale. She must have spent her last night in Philly painting the town. Our hangovers are one more thing we have in common. The prospect of disturbing her brings on a fresh wave of doubt.

Let the woman be, I think. *Her rest is more important than your delusions.*

SEAT 3A

But then a second little voice asks, *Of all the things you might have imagined, why a dead guy in an Eagles jersey?*

I have to know for sure. I clear my throat, but 3B doesn't budge.

"Excuse me, miss?" I say.

Nothing. I prod her arm with one finger. Her eyes pop open. She looks embarrassed, like there was something else she was supposed to have been doing and now I might tell on her.

"Sorry, I just need to use the restroom."

"Of course," she says.

She stretches and yawns, then steps into the aisle so I can squeeze past. I walk the short distance to the front of the cabin. Genna is standing near the exit, stocking a tray with cheap headphones. She sees me coming and smiles, but her eyes aren't so welcoming. As someone who's worked in the service industry his whole life, I know that look—Genna's flagged me as high maintenance.

"Everything okay?" she asks.

"Yes, thank you. I . . ."

I stall out. It's the same problem I faced with 2A. How do I ask what I want to ask without sounding like a lunatic?

"I saw someone, just now, when we took off," I tell her. "A man. By the river. He didn't look right. I think he might need help."

She rearranges my fragments into a complete thought: "You saw a man by the river who might need help?"

I nod. "He was wearing a green-and-white jersey."

"Okay."

"I was wondering if maybe you saw him too?"

She points to a fold-down seat beside the coffeemaker. "I didn't see much of anything."

The fact that she tells me *why* she couldn't have seen a distressed

A CHRISTIAN STONE THRILLER

man lying by the river feels encouraging. She must think I'm something less than a total crank.

"Listen," I say, "I know this sounds nuts, but would you mind asking the pilot if he noticed anything out of the ordinary?"

Now she looks amused. This is clearly a first.

"Why not?" she says. "Just wait here a moment."

I stand with one hand pressing against an overhead bin for balance while Genna knocks on the cockpit door, then steps inside and shuts it behind her. I wonder how she's framing the question. *I'm sure it's nothing, but this needy passenger paid for a first-class seat, and he wants to know if. . .* I picture them sharing a joke at my expense. Meanwhile, a potential murder victim is decomposing back at sea level.

Genna reemerges, shaking her head. "Sorry, but he didn't see anything unusual. Neither did the copilot."

"All right," I say. "Thank you for checking."

The sign on one of the two front-end bathrooms reads VACANT. I step inside and lock the door behind me. Nature isn't calling, but I need a minute to myself. We hit a pocket of turbulence just as I start to splash some water on my face. I manage to wet the top third of my sweater in the process. I mop the cotton dry with a handful of stiff paper towels, then look at myself in the mirror. I look surprisingly normal. I have a face you can trust. A face *I* can trust. I know what I saw. My mind isn't the type to play tricks.

So what's your next move? I ask myself.

The woman from 3B is waiting for me in the aisle. Her smile, like Genna's, is a cover. I can feel her thinking, *Once is enough, buddy.* I nod as though she's said it out loud, then slide back into my seat. I pull my laptop from my day bag and open it on the tray in front of me. If no one else can confirm what I saw, then I'll have to do it myself.

SEAT 3A

I start by searching the Philadelphia Police Department's Missing Persons Blotter. There's a whopping forty-five pages to scroll through, though only the faces featured on the first six pages have disappeared within the last month. None of them is even a ballpark match with the man I saw. Most are children, a mix of adolescent girls and boys. The rest are elderly. Even from that distance, I could tell my floater was a full-grown man with a healthy head of dark hair. Fully grown and in his prime. An Eagles fan. Those are all the facts I have to work with.

Maybe it's just too soon for him to have been reported missing. Maybe the very people who might have reported him missing are the ones who killed him. His wife. His lover. His father or mother, brother or sister. Or maybe he isn't so much missing as abandoned. A drug addict. An escapee from the nearest mental hospital. The kind of person who gets discarded. Whoever he is, my job now—the job I've assigned myself—is to cut through all the maybes. I'm the one who saw him. That's enough to make him my responsibility. I know what happens when the dead are left to fend for themselves. The guilty go unpunished. Loved ones stumble around in a fog that never really lifts. I was just eleven years old when my friend Jon was murdered, but I swore I'd never look away again.

I type *Schuylkill marinas* into a search engine, then click on the entry from Google Maps. There's only one in the right vicinity. The body I saw is lying less than a mile north of the Schuylkill Marina.

I navigate over to the American Airlines website. We're scheduled to land at 11:32 a.m. That means I'll have a half hour to kill in MIA before the next flight back to Philadelphia. I can't believe I'm seriously considering this—scrapping a week's vacation to follow some kind of gut instinct. But then the universe gives me a clear signal that I'm supposed to be on that flight: Seat 3A isn't booked.

CHAPTER THREE

“It’s work, isn’t it?” Michael says. “It’s always work.”

I’m in my car, heading to Schuylkill Marina. I-95 is a parking lot. I’ve been driving for half an hour and can still see the airport in my rearview mirror.

“I’m sorry,” I tell him. “Something came up. I need a couple of days to sort it out.”

His silence means he knows I’m withholding. I don’t tell him that I was just a few miles from his condo earlier this morning. He’ll think I’m nuts.

“Look, I’ll be there,” I say. “The trip’s just postponed.”

“I don’t know, Christian. I’m worried about you. Quinn’s right—you push yourself too hard.”

“I’m fine. I promise.”

I can feel him scowling into his phone.

“How about this?” he says. “If you’re not here by Friday afternoon, I’ll catch the next flight to Philly and drag your ass down here myself.”

Now it’s my turn to go quiet. Michael’s famous for his follow-through; if he says he’ll come get me, he means it.

“Do we have a deal?” he asks.

“Look, I can’t promise Friday,” I say. “But soon. I can promise I’ll be there soon.”

A CHRISTIAN STONE THRILLER

It's vague, but it's the best I have to offer. Michael grudgingly accepts. Twenty minutes later, I'm pulling into the marina. I called ahead and secured Schuylkill's cheapest rental, an aluminum fishing boat with a tiller steer outboard. A middle-aged man in a pale blue polo shirt with the letters *SM* embroidered above the right pocket greets me in the parking lot. Once I've filled out some paperwork, he walks me over to the rentals dock. On the way, we pass by a glass-walled restaurant and a VIP pier where the moored boats look like small-scale yachts. Both the restaurant and the marina are all but empty on a weekday afternoon.

"This beauty's all yours," the man says.

We're standing in front of a sleek and shiny skiff that looks more like a convertible race car than the motorized rowboat I'd been picturing.

"Ever used a tiller before?"

I tell him I have but don't mention that it's been more than a decade.

"There's a life jacket under each seat," he says. "It's a little nippy out there. I wouldn't be surprised if you have the river to yourself."

I bump hard into a pylon on my way out of the dock, but by the time I'm on the open water, I've started to feel confident at the helm. This is the kind of day people imagine when they dream of autumn in the East. Cold, yes, but the clear sky has held up, and the leaves along the banks have hit their peak shades of yellow and red. I feel worlds away from the Miami beach I'd planned to be lounging on right about now.

I doubt I've been on the water five minutes when I turn a bend and spot an oil drum sticking up out of a bed of phragmites. The surrounding water is littered with glass and plastic bottles, and the nearby shore is hidden under a dumpster's worth of trash. I slow

SEAT 3A

the boat to a crawl and steer toward the reeds. I'm sweating despite the temperature, and I can feel my pulse throbbing in every corner of my body. No doubt about it—this is the spot.

But then where is the body?

I inch right up to the reeds and cut the engine. I stand in the boat to see over the tops of the stems. The man in the Eagles jersey is gone. But there is what looks like a body-sized depression in the center of the reeds. As though something heavy was lying there not so long ago.

I switch the engine back on and maneuver around the periphery of the trash, then step out and drag the boat on shore, far enough so that I'm sure it won't slip back into the water and drift away. I climb higher up the bank, kicking aside cans and bottles as I go. Already, my sneakers and the cuffs of my jeans are covered in a swampy muck. Once I've reached the summit, I turn back and face the water. From my new vantage point, I can see straight down onto the reeds. Now I'm sure. It's clear from the way the reeds are folded over, like they're anxious to unfurl again. Something—or somebody—was pinning them down.

I scan the water and land in every direction, but the man in the Eagles jersey is nowhere to be found. The question is, Where did he go, and how did he get there? Was he carried away by a shifting tide? Do rivers even have shifting tides, or is that only for oceans? I'll need to do some research. And if the body was carried away, then why not the rest of the trash? Why not the oil drum? Or that tire resting right at the lip of the water?

Is it possible that he wasn't dead? Could he have gotten up and walked away under his own power? Did he wake up from an overdose? Was he knocked unconscious and prematurely left to die? But if he did walk away, then what path did he take? Just mooring

A CHRISTIAN STONE THRILLER

the boat and crossing roughly thirty yards, I've blazed a visible trail through a thick bed of detritus. I run my eyes back and forth over the bank and find no sign that anyone but me has been here. One thing's certain: The man I saw was in no condition to swim. Did someone on a passing boat spot him and drag him on board? I doubt it. Between the reeds and the trash, he was awfully well hidden. Unless, like me, you happened to be looking down from above.

I revisit one of my original hypotheses: He was never there to begin with. Like Claire said, I've been distracted. Distracted, and stuck in my own head. I've been looking at the world the way people look at Rorschach tests, projecting whatever's stewing in my brain out onto the picture. Is my unconscious fixated on death? Have I flooded it with too much *Law & Order*? Or maybe Michael and Quinn are right, and I've pushed myself to the point of snapping. What was it Quinn said to me the night she left? *You work for the sake of working. Your heart isn't even in it anymore. It's like you're afraid that if you stop, you'll die.*

I take a step back. I stare down at that flattened patch of reeds and do my best to see something other than the imprint of a body. I squint and cock my head, but nothing changes. There's a definite human-sized depression in the reeds.

What I need now is proof, evidence that I did or didn't see what I believe I saw. Whether the body washed up here or was placed here, whether someone killed him or knocked him unconscious or he harmed himself, there's a strong chance that the implement used is lying nearby. A knife or a gun or a baseball bat. A syringe or an empty pill bottle.

I wade out into the refuse, looking for an object that doesn't belong, the thing that isn't like the others. The trash is more diverse than I'd thought, and there's more of it than I would have expected

SEAT 3A

to see so close to a luxury marina. It isn't just plastic bottles and tin cans. I find a cut of drainage pipe. A stubby piece of driftwood. An old-fashioned rabbit-ears TV antenna. Back by the trees, I find a long swath of canvas tarp and a set of dented metal poles lying under a rusted shopping cart. The combination makes me wonder if there'd been a homeless encampment nearby. Maybe the man in the Eagles jersey was one of its residents. Maybe he wound up on the losing side of a territorial dispute. I check the poles for traces of blood but don't find any. I keep one pole in my hand and use it to dig through the surface layer of trash. I scatter countless bottles, thinking maybe the clue I'm searching for is buried closer to the ground. Mostly, what I uncover is more trash. Mottled sheets of newspaper, a chewed-up tennis ball, disposable cutlery, the head of a broom.

I glance down at my clothes. The muck and slime have climbed up my jeans, almost to my knees. My hands are a color I don't recognize. What will the folks at Schuylkill think when they see me? I feel like my sanity is in question. If there's something here, then I have to find it. But time is running out. The sun has already started to dip. I'm supposed to have the boat back by dark.

Just a little longer, I tell myself.

I give a fat plastic jug a hard whack and send it flying. And there, underneath, is the thing that's not like the others. At first, I'm not sure what it could be. It's the size of a library card or a driver's license, but its surface is partially obscured by mud. I pick it up and wipe it off on my already-sullied jeans, then examine it more closely. My heart rate careens back to peak levels. It's a laminated lanyard containing a ticket for last Sunday's Eagles game. Part of a season pass. I give it a more thorough cleaning, then stick it in my pocket.

A CHRISTIAN STONE THRILLER

I saw an Eagles jersey from the sky. I found an Eagles ticket on the ground. Coincidences don't come that big. This is real. There was a man's body lying in those reeds. Somewhere out there, someone who loves him is wondering why he didn't show up for dinner. Why he hasn't returned their phone calls or texts. Whoever he was, wherever he is now, something horrific happened to him. It's up to me to figure out what that something was. I won't leave him to fend for himself. As a kid, I had no choice. But I'm not a kid anymore.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ERIC SUGRUE is a successful Delaware restaurateur and entrepreneur with a love for crime fiction. He was inspired to write a mystery of his own when, in seat 3A on a flight from Philadelphia to Miami, he looked out the window and spotted what, at a glance, seemed to be a body. He was quickly able to determine that it wasn't a body, but the possibility stuck with him and became the inciting incident for *Seat 3A*. When not juggling his varied business responsibilities, he enjoys cooking, entertaining friends, honing his golf and tennis skills, and reading and watching crime thrillers. He resides in Rehoboth Beach, Delaware, with his wife, Laura, and their adorable dog, Wally. In the winter months, they spend as much time as they can in Miami Beach. *Seat 3A* is his first novel in what he hopes to develop into a series of Christian Stone adventures and a movie.