

# The Carbon Trail

Catriona King



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For my mother.



## **About the Author**

Catriona King trained as a Doctor, police Forensic Medical examiner and health service manager in London, where she worked for many years. In recent years, she has returned to live in Belfast.

She has written since childhood; fiction, fact and reporting. 'The Carbon Trail' is a standalone thriller set in New York City, USA. Catriona has visited the USA many times and has family there.

Catriona is also the author of the popular Craig Modern Thriller Series, which follows Marc Craig and his team through and beyond the streets of Belfast in their hunt for serial killers.

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Catriona King  
Belfast, April 2014

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# **The Carbon Trail**





## Chapter One

**New York City. Wednesday, September 3rd 2014.  
10.45 p.m.**

Greg Chapman stared at the tall man, shocked by how calm he felt. Thoughts crowded into his mind; the clearest one was that he'd failed. Someone else would take over now. He gazed at the smooth, black floor longing for sleep but fought the urge hard, knowing that it would be his final nap. There were so many things that he'd left undone. Marriage, kids, another trip home to see his folks.

The man watched Chapman in silence, holding something just beyond his reach, its outline blurred by the brightness of the room. Chapman needed all his strength to breathe, each gasp increasingly laboured as he approached his last. He'd always known that the job would kill him. It killed them all in the end.

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**Lloyd Harbor, Long Island. Thursday. 6.30 a.m.**

The sound of rushing water knocked the man off-balance and he fell against the glass wall, scrambling frantically to steady himself with a hand. His grip failed and he hurtled towards the white-tiled floor, catching a glimpse of the water as it flowed towards the drain. Instead of the clear liquid that he expected to

see, the outlet was filled with a dark-red pool that circled the rim twice before disappearing. The colour diluted slowly, melting to a faint trail of pink as the man watched in fascination. His fascination changed to fear when he realised that he was looking at blood.

The man searched his body for injury and pain. First his trunk and then each muscled limb, until, in a last effort to find the blood's source, he searched his face. As his fingers rushed across its contours he froze, stunned by its unfamiliarity. It was his jaw and his nose, yet he didn't recognise either. Logic cut through his shock. He had no wounds and no pain except a piercing headache, nothing to explain the water's colour. It wasn't his blood. And if it wasn't his, then who did it belong to?

The tint faded as the man gazed at it, until the water ran glassy clear. As he lay there, rained on by the warm shower, questions formed and broke in his mind before he could grasp them. Two solidified. Where was he? And what the hell was he doing there?

Suddenly the cubicle wall shook, jerking him from his thoughts and a hand loomed towards him through the mist. The man recoiled, until he saw that its open palm held no threat. Two long fingers tapped lightly on the glass, telling him that the hand was female. Blonde curls appeared, followed by a blurred face showing a look of concern. He smiled reflexly at the face's prettiness and then smiled again, touched by the stranger's caring look. The words that came next said that the woman was no stranger.

"Jeff. Are you OK? You've been in there for almost an hour."

The man recoiled again, shocked by her knowledge of him. Jeff. Was that his name? And if it was, then why didn't it sound familiar? He squinted to see her face and another question came. Who was she?

The woman's face pressed closer to the glass until he could see her large, dark eyes. They looked gentle. A second later the glass wall swung back and she came fully into view. She was

small and slim, and her face and clothes said that she was somewhere in her thirties. She gazed up at him; her face wearing a look of concern, then leaned slowly behind him, turning off the shower with one hand. A large towel hung from the other, its weight implying comfort.

The woman reached up and draped it around him, rubbing gently at his back, then she moved slowly down his body, patting him dry as she went. She cared for him without embarrassment, implying an intimacy and knowledge long before that day.

As she drew him carefully from his glass cocoon and knelt on the floor at his feet, drying each toe as if he was a child, the man gazed down at the light tan of her hands. He already knew that her eyes were blue but when she glanced up he saw them clearly. What a blue. They were a dark French-navy and the fine lines at their edges creased-up in a smile, with an ease that showed she did it often.

The man gazed around the room as she worked. It was a large bathroom with white-tiled walls and a floor of honey-coloured wood, whispering taste and money. A feeling of peace enveloped him and he knew that he was safe there, wherever it was. From the blood to the woman and his name, he'd assimilated each shock as quickly as it had come. He stood unperturbed now, waiting for the next. It came in a glance. A wedding ring on his hand and then on hers. Married. And then another shock. His reflection in the mirrored wall.

He stared at himself as if he was a stranger. There was no flicker of recognition, no sense of familiarity as he stared at the toned forty-something across the room. It was an image of someone else. He touched his arm to test its reality and watched as the reflection touched his too. He smiled and he smiled back, handsome and tanned, without any sense of who he was.

When the next surprise came the man only glimpsed it. A small toothbrush beside the sink. She had a child. They had a child? He had no memory of any of it. He let out an anguished

moan and the woman gazed up at him anxiously. He smiled, not wanting to make her afraid. If he was her husband he wanted to protect her. The thought told him something else. He cared.

His wife returned to her task; ministering to him with a tenderness that felt completely new. If someone had been this kind to him before then he'd forgotten. She wrapped a fresh towel around him and took his hand, leading him to a bedroom where he dressed in perfectly fitting clothes. Then breakfast in a kitchen whose sunny warmth echoed hers. She smiled at him over coffee, with a look that the man recognised as love. Wherever he was, he was home.

## Chapter Two

**7.00 a.m.**

“Do you really have to go to work, Jeff? Can’t Devon gather the data for once?”

Jeff stared at his wife blankly, with no idea what she was talking about. An honest answer would have said too much, so instead he just smiled and gave a reply so neutral that no-one could have questioned it.

“Sorry, honey. But yes.”

She sighed and then nodded once, resigned. “OK, but don’t forget we have an appointment to view a kindergarten for Emmie, at five. We can’t miss it.”

Just then a small figure appeared at the kitchen door and the woman turned and smiled broadly, holding out her arms towards a little girl. Jeff gauged her age as somewhere less than three and smiled as well, mimicking his wife. It was the right thing to do, but no paternal feeling followed. The girl climbed onto her mother’s lap and the woman kissed her silky curls, talking to him over her head.

“Silly Daddy has to go to work. Let’s drive him there after breakfast. We’ll have him all to ourselves tonight.”

Jeff nodded, recognising that it was his cue, but his mind was on other things. Where did he work? And what would he do when she left him there and drove away? When they’d finished their meal the woman handed him his jacket. A badge hung from the lapel. ‘Dr Jeff Mitchell: Scrabo Research Enterprises’.

Jeff Mitchell, and he was a doctor, but what sort? He worked at some place called Scrabo; it didn't sound like any hospital he'd ever known. He dreaded to think what job he'd soon be showing his ignorance of and prayed that it didn't involve patients' health.

Thirty minutes later they pulled the front door closed and stood like a family in the leafy street. Jeff Mitchell gazed around him, searching for some landmark that he knew, but there was nothing. Just a quiet suburban road, full of trees and prosperous lives. The new model Lexus in the driveway showed that they had one as well.

He stared at the sky and then scanned the horizon. They were somewhere elevated, somewhere near New York. That much he recognised from the skyscrapers in the distance and the new One World Trade Center. He knew it was morning because they'd just had breakfast and the watch on his wrist said so. That was everything he knew about his life. His name was Jeff Mitchell, he was a New Yorker, married, a father and he was on his way to work. It was enough for now.

The woman started the car and they drove smoothly down the wide street. The trees at each side gave it a cosy feel and their leaves formed a rainbow of earthy hues. He could see the first fall shedding on the lawns below; autumn but not cold yet; September. As Jeff Mitchell gazed around and made small talk, his wife seemed unfazed by his vague replies. He wondered why and then decided to be grateful instead. Until he had some clarity, endless questions were the last thing that he needed.

Mitchell sat back, relaxing as much as he could on his way to a job that he had no idea how to do. As they reached the road's end and turned left at the junction, neither of them noticed the dark sedan pulling out behind. It followed at a distance as they drove through the suburban roads of Lloyd's Harbor, then left Long Island by the Midtown Tunnel. It was still with them fifty minutes later when they reached Manhattan's urban sprawl.

The traffic slowed to a crawl as they neared their goal and

cold drops of sweat trickled down Mitchell's back. He pictured the nightmarish day of meetings that lay ahead, with people that he couldn't recall. Pulling down the passenger visor, he stared at his face in the mirror inside; a complete stranger stared back, his blue eyes and strong bones still unknown.

The Lexus pulled up on West Street and a moment later Jeff Mitchell was standing outside a multi-storey tower signed 'Scрабо Research Enterprises', focusing so hard that he completely missed the sedan parking across the street.

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### **Worth Street, Lower Manhattan.**

Magee dialled the cell-phone number for the third time then sighed in exasperation as it rang out and cut to answerphone. Where the hell was Greg Chapman? He'd been tasked with a simple surveillance and he couldn't even manage that. He corrected himself immediately, knowing that his anger was masking concern. Chapman was a good agent, really good. It wasn't like him to go off piste. Some of the others, yes, but never him. Something was wrong.

Magee glanced at his watch. There'd been no contact from Chapman for ten hours; three check-ins missed. He started to wheeze and reached for his inhaler, sucking hard on it as he thought. Greg Chapman was dead, he was sure of it. Magee shook his head determinedly. No. Until he saw a body he wasn't giving up. He re-checked the time then lifted the phone and called Greg Chapman for the fourth time that day.

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### **West Street, Manhattan.**

The glass door rotated and Jeff Mitchell stepped hesitantly

into Scrabo Research Enterprise's bright entrance-hall. It had a high transparent ceiling and metal elevators racing for the sky. He watched as a throng of people rushed past him towards their work, all certain of their destination. He envied them.

Mitchell's shoulders were jostled occasionally with a "Hey buddy, move out of the way" but he held his ground, staring curiously after them. They were mostly young, male and female, in a uniform of t-shirts and jeans, bearing jokey slogans of 'scientists do it atomically' and 'I'm the biggest bang in town'. Some were older like him, dressed in suits and carrying cases. Mitchell watched as the throng narrowed to an orderly crocodile and wondered where it stopped. He stepped sideways and got his answer. A security guard stood fifty feet ahead, running a metal wand across each member of the queue. He took their bags and laid them on a conveyor that ran through an X-ray machine. They were being searched! For what?

Mitchell's thoughts were interrupted by a firm slap on his back. He jerked around, his fists drawn, ready to strike. Their progress was halted by the shocked smile of a dark-haired young man, his hurriedly upheld palms indicating peace.

"Wow! That was fast! Where the hell did you learn that?"

The young man's tone showed annoyance, despite the softness of his southern drawl. Mitchell held his fists in position, scrutinising the man, until instinct said that he was no threat and Mitchell dropped his arms down by his side. More questions raced through Mitchell's mind. Where had he learned to fight? And why were his reflexes so damn fast? The man stared at him, puzzled.

"Jeff?"

Mitchell glanced at the man's badge. 'Dr Devon Cantrell'. Devon. Karen had mentioned his name at breakfast. They worked together every day yet Mitchell felt like he'd never seen him before. The only thing to do was bluff.

"Sorry, Devon. You startled me."

Cantrell nodded forgivingly. "No problem. I know you're



stressed about the work. What time did you get home last night? You were still here when I left.”

Mitchell shook his head. “No idea.” It wasn’t a lie.

Cantrell gestured him forward and they joined the queue.

“I bet Karen was pissed about that.”

So that was his wife’s name. Karen Mitchell. It had a nice ring to it. Cantrell was still talking. “Did you make any progress after I left?”

Progress on what? Mitchell shook his head slowly, knowing that the gesture would cover everything. They reached the guard and he greeted both men cheerfully by name. Cantrell dropped his briefcase on the belt, holding his arms high to be scanned. Mitchell mimicked his actions then followed him through, looking for answers.

“Do they really need to do that when they know us?”

The younger man glanced up at him curiously and then shrugged. “Even we could be psychopaths, and if someone brought a weapon in here they could wreak havoc. Besides, you know there are people who’d pay a lot for Scrabo’s research, especially ours.”

They entered an elevator and a slim brunette slipped in just as the doors started to close, smiling up at Mitchell knowingly. He had no idea who the girl was but he recognised her message right away. He was a player! Mitchell shook his head once and her face fell. He couldn’t believe he’d done that to his wife, but then he’d no idea what he was capable of. Mitchell’s thoughts flew back to that morning’s bloody shower and he shuddered.

The doors opened on the fifteenth floor and Devon Cantrell exited, staring at Mitchell curiously as he lagged behind. The door went to close and he blocked it with his foot.

“Wake up, Jeff. It’s our floor.”

Mitchell followed him hastily to some glass double-doors where Cantrell inputted a code. Mitchell quickly memorised the numbers, certain that he’d be expected to know them next time. The doors slid open and the noise level rose as they

entered a bright room lined with machines and people in white-coats.

People nodded deferentially as they walked past and Mitchell immediately knew that they were in charge. In charge of what? And which one of them was the boss? The answers came a moment later when Cantrell entered an office marked 'Deputy Director of Research'. Mitchell turned and saw his name on the door opposite, with 'Director' written underneath.

He pushed the door open and entered a small room, gazing around it. He obviously spent his days there but it was another place that he'd no memory of. Mitchell placed his briefcase on the desk and took in his surroundings. The office was warm and bright, courtesy of a wall-sized window onto New York. Its walls and carpet were pale and its shelves were stacked with books. Mitchell lifted one and opened it; a book on the fall of the Berlin wall. A history book. But he hated history. Mitchell was surprised by the knowledge when he knew nothing else about his life. And if he hated history so much then why have the book in his office at all? He lifted a second book, 'Graphene; Carbon Rediscovered' and began to read its dust jacket.

Suddenly a pain skewered through Mitchell's head. He gasped at its intensity and fell back against the wall, sliding to the floor and struggling not to throw up. The feeling passed as quickly as it came and shock took its place. What the hell had that been? And what had caused it? His last thought before the pain had been the book on carbon. Had that triggered it? Mitchell glanced cautiously towards the bookcase, feeling nothing new. He knew nothing about carbon, except that it was an element. Was it something to do with his work?

Mitchell scrambled to his feet and scanned the room, bracing himself for more shocks. There were none, only files and a computer. The only personal items were pictures of Karen and Emmie. He was in some of them, smiling proudly, hugging them for the snap. He had a happy marriage, or as happy as the

woman in the elevator implied. He sat down and rubbed his temple, trying to remember more, but nothing came.

A manual lay open on the desk and Mitchell flicked quickly through its pages. They were covered in equations that he didn't understand and he broke out in a cold sweat. But they told him something; he wasn't a medical doctor, he was a scientist. Mitchell knew right then that he was screwed; he would never be able to understand all this. He could bluff the social side of life, but work was another matter, especially work this complex.

Just then Devon entered the room, carrying two coffee mugs. He put one in front of Mitchell then sat down, starting to talk. Mitchell sipped his drink and listened, watching the young man's enthusiasm as he talked about their work. If Devon asked him any questions he was in trouble. He needn't have worried. Devon talked in jargon for ten full minutes without drawing breath. Mitchell nodded as if he was listening, grateful for the chance to gather his thoughts.

He was a scientist; his subject was some sort of biophysics, judging by the equations. And he was successful at it - the boss of this floor. They were researching something important; now he just had to find out what. Devon's soft tones broke through Mitchell's reverie.

"It's all very well duplicating results once we've achieved a breakthrough, Jeff, but so far we haven't. What do you think?"

Mitchell startled, realising that he was expected to speak. He sat forward authoritatively, instinct telling him that half the bluff was in the delivery.

"OK. Let's go back to basics. What is it that's stopping us achieving it?" Whatever *it* was.

Mitchell fixed Devon with a challenging look that he knew no deputy could resist. He wasn't disappointed. Devon restarted, while Mitchell wondered where he'd learned how to bluff so well.

"OK. We know Graphene is just another form of carbon, with the atoms bonded together a different way. Just another

allotrope, like diamonds or graphite. Yes?”

Mitchell nodded as if he understood. Graphene; the title of the book. So that was what they were researching. The name rang a distant bell, as if he'd heard it on the news, but that was as far as his knowledge went. Devon was still talking.

“OK, so what do we already know? We know that in diamonds the carbon atoms are arranged in a tetrahedral lattice, whereas in graphite, they're arranged hexagonally and in sheets. Graphene's just a sheet of graphite one atom thick, but that gives it special properties; it's light and conducts electricity very well.” Devon shook his head, dejected. “But hell, the whole world has known that since 2004 and everyone everywhere is working to make money from it, including us.”

Mitchell snorted derisively, deliberately goading Devon for more information.

“So you're saying that for ten years, no-one's come up with anything new on carbon?”

Devon shook his head impatiently. “No. No, that's not what I meant. We both know there are people out there doing brilliant work, like the research on T and D-Carbon. But that just means *we* need to go even further to make our mark.”

Mitchell pushed his luck hard. “OK. So, two things. One, why do we want to go further, apart from our giant egos? And two, what specifically are we aiming for?”

Devon leaned forward, enjoying the debate. “You already know why we want to go further! There's huge money to be made. If we could find something completely new that no-one else has thought of, we'd make fortunes for Scrabo, the U.S. and ourselves.”

“So what's stopping us?”

Devon didn't notice that his boss had only offered questions, not ideas. He answered cheerfully, pleased at the chance to show off.

“It's like you said last week. Instead of just working on existing carbon allotropes, what if we applied what we'd learned

to carbon-based life? Carbon is a key component for all life on Earth, including making up nearly twenty percent of the human body. Just think about it, Jeff. If we could create a new form of carbon in living organisms, the sky would be the limit!”

Mitchell struggled hard not to show his surprise. Messing about with living things! This was heavy stuff. And yet... it rang a bell somewhere in his head.

Devon stared into space for a moment and then shook his head. “It’s a dream. Sci-fi. No-one will never crack it. But just imagine the medical applications if we did.”

Mitchell startled at the word ‘medical’. Could it help explain his memory loss? He leaned forward eagerly. “Let’s focus on the medical side for a minute. Any further thoughts on that?”

Before Devon could answer the desk-phone rang. Mitchell motioned him to answer it.

“Yes?... What, now? ...Oh, OK then.”

Devon dropped the receiver and sprang to his feet. “That was the Boardroom, they want us upstairs. I’ll grab my laptop; it’s got all the latest stuff.”

Mitchell’s cold sweat from earlier returned ten-fold. It wouldn’t take a company Board long to realise that he knew nothing. Bluff only worked so far. He scanned the office urgently for something that might help him, already knowing that he wouldn’t understand anything he found.

Devon re-appeared and one minute later they were heading for the twentieth floor. What happened there would stun them both.