

CHAPTER 1

My heart pounded as Roy and I approached the crumbling farmhouse, guided solely by the cryptic tip that had landed on my desk earlier that day. The swampy night clung to us, shrouding the isolated property in an ominous stillness. Moonlight struggled to penetrate the dense canopy of ancient oaks, casting eerie shadows on the worn wooden planks.

A lantern flickered dimly, revealing the peeling paint and years of neglect that clung to the structure. The humidity hung thick in the air, as if the very atmosphere held its breath, aware of the gravity of our presence. I felt the weight of my holster, fingers tracing the familiar contours, while Roy mirrored my silent tension.

Years of chasing this guy had woven a tapestry of memories through the alleys of New Orleans and across Louisiana's parishes. Yet, this forsaken farmhouse stood as a culmination—a potential revelation. The anonymous informant had led us here, and as we approached, each creak of the decaying wood beneath our boots seemed to echo the ghosts of the killer's past.

Locking eyes with Roy, unspoken understanding passed between us. The night held secrets, and within those decaying walls, we stood at the precipice of unmasking the elusive perpetrator who had eluded us for over a year.

The sound of croaking tree frogs from the nearby swamp drowns out our footsteps and whispers. Around the farmhouse, everyone is on edge in anticipation of what's to come next.

“I need a perimeter set up around the entire place; one team enter from the front, and the other on the side. Roy you're with me,” I say, rigging my vest trying not to show the nervousness I am feeling. “The suspect we are looking for is one named Michael Watts, we all know what he looks like; now let's move!”

We all head to our positions while relaying the final instructions. We arrive at the front door, and I begin to count down, three...two...one. My hand formed a fist as an officer kicked in the door. We entered from the front and back positions, smashing through the place searching room by room for him. The constant sound of wood splintering and glass shattering fills my ears, but so far, he is nowhere in sight.

I look around the house to see the furniture inside is covered in dust and grime like no one had lived in the place for years. Old picture frames with broken glass hang from the tattered walls. The old floors creak and pop with each step I take as if I can fall through at any moment. This run-down shithole is spooky and damp like a scene from a horror movie. He chose the right place to match his psychotic mind.

Having no luck on our end, Roy and I listen as officers search every inch of the home, yelling “clear” from each room when they come up short-handed. Agents begin to gather in a large dining room, talking among themselves. Out the corner of my eye, I noticed a doorknob on the wall next to an old grandfather clock.

This must be used for something; Who places a doorknob on a wall without it having some importance? I think to myself.

I walk over and turn the knob, revealing a hidden door leading out to a gravel-filled pathway outside. I take a step out onto the rocks and suddenly begin to hear a whimpering child coming from behind me. I turn around slowly, trying to pinpoint where the sound is coming from. I told two of the nearest officers to check the outside path and I headed towards the stairs.

The aged banister looked as if it would break away with the slightest touch, and the old steps felt soft as though they would collapse at any moment beneath my feet. A bright light shined from underneath a door directly at the top of the stairs. I can see someone's shadow pacing back and forth behind it.

I draw my weapon, looking behind me and seeing Roy following closely. A tapping in my throat rose as I reached for the doorknob, shooting stress levels shoot through the roof. I push open the door and cringe at the sound of the rusted hinges giving away our arrival. I hold up my hand in front of my eyes shielding them from the bright light. Through my fingers I could see the silhouette of a man standing near the window frozen in place. As the light dimmed, my eyes began to adjust, showing me a clearer description of him. A white male drenched in sweat and wearing an old dirty grey t-shirt with ragged blue jeans. His face appears as if he hasn't slept or showered in weeks. "Are you looking for me?" he screams out in a deep, scratchy voice.

"Freeze, asshole!" Roy yells.

"Get on the ground, Watts!" My words follow.

As I expected, he doesn't comply with either of our demands, or even seems to care. *There is something devilish about the look in his eyes. This guy will not surrender easily.*

"Get on the ground now!" I scream out again.

"I don't think he's listening," Roy says.

The man smirks as he slowly steps towards an old nightstand where a machete is lying on top of it. His shivering hand reaches out to pick up the weapon. Roy points his gun directly at him.

"Don't you do it mother fucker!"

I touch Roy on his shoulder, urging him to wait. "We need to take him in alive, I know this is hard, but we need answers."

Roy's brows snap together as he drops his head down. He takes a deep breath, squeezing the handle of his firearm tighter.

"Fuck that; you want me to ease up on this mother fucker? James, he killed Jen," he says looking at me with glistening eyes.

I can tell what he's thinking: *don't you dare try to stop me.*

"Soon the world will be covered in my darkness. The blood of the wicked will run deep through the roots of the earth, and God shall know I did his bidding." Watts says. I turned my attention back to him.

"The only darkness you will see is when your eyes close once I put a bullet between them," says Roy.

I inch closer to where Watts is standing, trying to control the situation. "Look, just put the weapon down and come with us," I say to him, staring into his dark eyes.

He begins laughing uncontrollably while shaking his head. I can see his fist clenching tighter around the handle of the blade. *Dammit, he's about to make a move.*

"If you take one more step, I will blow you away!" Roy shouts.

"That's what he wants you to do, don't you see? He wants you to kill him," I say, trying to reason with my partner one last time before the situation spirals. I turn to Watts. "Listen, we can help you; we just need you to cooperate with us."

"There's no need for me to be cooperative. My destiny has been written. I intend to die here tonight."

"Dammit," I whisper to myself.

This is it; there's no more talking. There's seems to be nothing else I can do to stop this. Both of their minds are already made up. I guess I know what I must do.

I take my focus from Watts, trying to stop Roy from firing his weapon. I reach out to touch his hand. "Wait!" I yell, but he's no longer listening.

Watts lunges towards me, holding the machete high in the air before bringing it down like a lumber jack, trying chop down a tree. A burning agony tore through my chest. The pain feels as if my entire breast plate has been shattered. A metallic scent filled my nose as I looked down to see a waterfall of crimson pouring from me. My legs became noodles as I stumbled back falling to the floor. My eye looks up at the old, damaged ceiling as my head

rests upon the carpet.

I hear Roy fire his weapon multiple times, then a large thud from what I assume to be Watts hitting the floor.

This is it; I'm going to die; I think to myself as tears formed in my eyes. I can feel my life force slipping away. I watch as Roy rushes over to me, taking off his jacket, placing it on my chest to help stop the bleeding. I screamed in agony as he applied pressure on my chest.

"It's going to be ok, partner you hear me? Hold on James," he says.

A loud *boom* shakes the house, followed by that extremely bright light from earlier. I raise my head to see Roy's face one last time, but my vision goes dark.

"And that's when I wake up. I stopped having them for a while, but lately they have come back full force." I say, sitting up on the couch.

I stare at my therapist, hoping she can give me some answers to these recurring dreams. I do not know why they have started again, but they are more intense than usual.

She takes off her glasses and begins writing on her notepad. She raises her head and locks eyes with me. "So, do you still think about that case as much as you use to?" she asks.

"No, I can honestly say not as much as I used to. I may think about it every now and again sometimes, and then there are times where I don't think about it at all, yet the dreams still happen. What does that have to do with anything?"

She sets her notepad and glasses onto the table next to her. *God just let her get to the point, I don't feel like being lectured again.*

"Well James, sometimes our dreams can be a telling reflection of our thoughts while we are awake. The things we usually tend to think and feel throughout our day can play back into or affect what our dreams are about. You may not think about the event in its entirety, but in smaller portions your mind does."

"OK, so what do you suggest I do, or don't do?"

She picks up a pamphlet off her desk, gazing at the cover before handing it to me. "Have you thought about practicing meditation again? You should take some time off. The stress of work can also play a part in our emotions. A full day or two of relaxing will be good for you."

Before I can answer her, my phone begins to vibrate in my pocket. I pull it out to see Roy's face with a big smile plastered on the screen. Should have known he was going to do something like this when asked to use my phone yesterday. Of all the photos he could have chosen, it's this one. *What could He want? He knows I'm in my weekly session.*

I told my therapist to give me a moment. "Hey, I'm with my therapist; what's up?" I say upon answering.

"Well, it seems like you're going to have to cut your session short today," I hear his mild New Orleans accent say from the other end. "Time to roll; we've got one on the Lakefront."

I place my hand on my forehead. "Jesus, it's not even eleven a.m. yet. Shit, um, ok I will meet you there."

"Sorry to interrupt brother but, as I always say, wicked acts don't wait for righteous redemption."

I shake my head. "I still don't know what that means."

"Oh, you will, but in the meantime, saddle up cowgirl, it's time to go."

Out the corner of my eyes I see my therapist stand at her feet and take a few steps towards me.

"Is everything ok?" she asks with a concerned look in her eyes.

"There's been a murder, I have to go," I tell her as I pick up my coat.

"I understand. Please take this brochure with you and give it some thought."

I take it out of her hand and nod my head. Glancing at the pamphlet, it looks like something out of a movie scene. A bunch of looneys sitting around in a circle with their arms and legs folded. Some people say this kind of stuff works, but it never did for me. "Will do," I tell her as I open the door and leave the office.

I step out the building onto the sidewalk and begin heading down Julia St. towards my car. I zip up my jacket, feeling the frigid wind blow, chilling everything on my body down to my bones. The sunlight shining down from the blanket of blue above seems to not help at all. *I'm so ready for winter to be over with.* I think to myself.

I arrive at my car and pull a pack of cigarettes from my coat pocket. I was supposed to quit weeks ago, but sometimes I

cannot beat the urges. I light one up, taking a long drag, feeling a rush of calm taking over me. I lean on the hood, soaking in the sound of chirping birds in the trees above. I watch as they chase each other through the air before flying off towards the clouds. *They seem so free.*

Crowds of people hustle and bustle across the busy downtown streets, trying to beat incoming traffic. There is always an influx of people walking during this time of day. Most of them are office workers from the surrounding buildings, while the others work for the many restaurants and hotels in the city. New Orleans is a place that thrives off tourism. Without it, the city would surely fall under.

“Detective DeBouse!” I heard someone call out from the other side of the street. I turn my head to see two odd-looking fellas walking towards me in black suits. *God, please do not let this be about what I think it is. Sigh’ I really do not need this right now.*

“Who's asking?” I yelled out.

“I’m Deputy Assistant Director John Wittman, and this is special agent Aiden Cormick,” one of them says, extending out his hand. I oblige. *What does the FBI want from me again? Whatever it is, I guess I’m about to find out.*

“What do I owe the pleasure of you gentleman visiting me today and how did you know where to find me?”

Wittman smirks. “As much as I would like to say the FBI has the resources to find anyone even those who do not want to be found, your captain told us where we could locate you. I hope that is not a problem.”

So, he went to the station looking for me; this must be something important.

“Let me cut to the chase, I do not want to take up much of your time. I am here because you have an exceptional record of accomplishment as a detective and we would like you to join us at the Bureau,” Wittman says.

“Wow, I had no idea you guys’ recruit,” I respond sarcastically.

“Well, it all depends on If the candidate has exceedingly immense potential. If so, then yes, we will. That is why we are here,” says agent Aiden.

“Well guys I must say, I am flattered but—”

“Before you answer, just think: the pay is much better than what your current salary is, you won’t have limits on crossing state lines when assigned to a case, you would have unlimited resources when it comes to data and information, and some of the best forensic minds in the world at your disposal.”

Aiden’s lips curve into a slight grin. Both have sales associates smiles on their faces right now. I bet they think I am sold and ready to buy, but little do they know, this is not my first rodeo with the Bureau trying to recruit me. The agency has tried multiple times over the past five years, and each time I tell them no, they continue to try. It is starting to get annoying at this point. I’m not interested; my city is especially important to me.

“Sounds like a good deal, but I’m going to take a hard pass on it. I belong here in the city, New Orleans is my home, and the people need me here.”

Wittman smiles. “And here I thought I was going to be the guy that nabbed you, but I understand.”

“I guess you do know about all my previous interactions then,” I chuckle.

“A lot more than you know, James, he says, changing the playful look on his face into a more serious one. He hands me his card. “I’ll be waiting on your call.”

Hmph’ keep waiting.

I get into my car and start the engine. Before driving off, I glance through the rearview mirror, watching as Wittman continues to stand there with his hands in his pockets, staring as I pull away. I have a strange feeling that this guy will not give up as easily as the others have. He seems like the type who does not take no for an answer. My mind is settled nonetheless, and nothing can change that.

I slam my foot on the gas pedal, peeling off down the street. *He honestly doesn’t know what he’s getting himself into.*

I finally arrived on the lakefront after a twenty-minute drive, parking my car and exiting my vehicle. Peering over towards the grassy field, I see a black dog sitting alone, staring in my direction. *That’s odd,* I think to myself. There is no owner anywhere in sight, and no visible collar on its neck. Must be a stray.

As I move away from my car, the canine’s eyes stay on me, but its head does not move. A wave of uncanny feelings

washes over me; it is as if the eerie looking hound knows exactly who I am. I shake it off and leave the area.

The smell of the fresh water fills my nostrils as the waves crash against concrete levees. Squawking from a flock of seagull's scrapping over crumbs resonate in my ears. *Those damn birds always annoyed me.* A gale of wind blew as I walked towards Roy who was standing with a few officers. I take a bottle of pills from my coat pocket popping one in my mouth.

"You still taking those?" he says, handing me a cup of coffee, pointing down at my feet.

"Ugh, this is why I hate coming to this area," I say, using a napkin to wipe mud off my boots. After being held up by the feds, this coffee is exactly what I need, and yes, I am still taking them because I need them."

He clapped his hands together. "One, you don't need them, and two, I can't believe they're still bothering you after all this time."

"Yup, and this time they sent in the big guns. Deputy Assistant Director Wittman."

"No way! Sheesh, you are becoming popular with the agency. This is like the fifth time they have tried."

"And the fifth time I said no."

"Well, you're better than me partner, because I would have taken it the first time they offered."

I raise my brows. "Why is that?"

"Uh, better pay, great benefits, more resources to do your job. Do you seriously have to ask?" He says, stretching out his arms.

I scoff. "You sound just like him."

"I'm just saying," he shrugs.

"Anyhow, thanks for the coffee, man, and it is still hot. I needed this honestly."

The heat from the cup sends a warm sensation through my hands. I can see the hot steam rising through the tip of the lid. *Lord knows I needed this.*

"Figured you would after your therapy session."

"Yes, I made a fresh cup at home earlier but didn't get to finish it."

We talk about our morning while walking over to where the body lies covered by a sheet. I peer down at the blood stains

on the white garment. I don't know if I am completely ready for this yet.

"How are you guys doing this morning?" One of the officers standing nearby asks.

"It would be such an amazing day if this wasn't for the circumstances," I reply.

"Same shit, different day, how about you guys?" says Roy.

The officer's eyes widen giving me an indication of what I'm about to see. Another one hands me the victim's identification just before briefing us on the situation.

"The victim is a twenty-four-year-old African American female. Her name is Tonya Sawyer; Danny was the one who found her this morning lying here on the hill while he was doing his usual patrol."

I bend down, pulling the sheet back, staring at the young woman's lifeless body. The smell of death smacks me in the face as a wave of chills run through me. The color of her skin has changed from what must have once been a beautiful shade of brown, into a grey emptiness. *She is so young. How could anyone do something like this? So horrific and twisted,* is all I can think. I never understood what motivates a person to do something like this. Something so delicate as an innocent life, snatched away so easily from existence.

"How could someone do this to another human being?" Roy says, rubbing the top of his head.

"Those were my exact thoughts," I say.

"There are some sick people in this world."

His muffled words touch my ears. I continue to peer down at the victim with my mind full of endless thoughts.

"Hey James, check this out." Roy says, pulling back a portion of the sheet drenched in blood from the victim's lower body.

As I glance over, a wave of pricking goosebumps form on my arms. The grotesque sight caused my stomach to quiver. The victim's right leg has been severed away from her body.

I turn away mortified by the sight and something else catches my eye. A black substance smeared on the ground near her body. I pull the entire sheet off, causing some of it to blow in the wind and pass directly in front of my face. I drag my finger

along the ground, bringing it up to my nose. It has a hint of burned wood in addition to the smell of ashes after a cremation.

“There’s a smell of cinder to it,” I say to Roy.

He dabs his fingers in it and sniffs. “Sure is.”

He rose to his feet looking around amongst the crowd of officers. “Where is Danny?” he asks.

“He's right over there,” says one of the officers.

“Hey Danny, come over here!” Roy shouts.

The poor guy has not been on the force for a solid two years and he is already seeing things like this. His ambling steps and trembling hands let me know that he is still shaken up by what he found. I can still remember the first time I saw a dead body; it was my first year on the force. A guy blew his brains out in broad daylight on Canal St, and I was responding officer to the call. I was shaken up for days after seeing brain matter and pieces of his skull still oozing down the car window when I arrived. A horrific image I will never forget.

“I just want to ask you a few questions,” says Roy.

He nods. “Okay, no problem.”

“Around what time did you find the body?”

“It was about 8:45 a.m. on the nose, I believe. Yes, that was the exact time,” Danny says, looking at his watch.

His eyes dart back and forth as if he thinks he is in trouble.

The poor guy is acting like he’s a suspect.

“Were there any other people in the area at the time you found the victim's body?” I ask.

“No, there was no one else around. When I start my morning patrols there is usually no one out here that early. So, I just cruise with my windows down listening to the waves.” He speaks.

“I think that’s all we need, thanks, Danny,” Roy says, giving him a pat on the shoulder.

He walks away, but suddenly turns back with a confused expression. “You know what? I did see something strange back over by the rest area,” his words stumbled out with a slight crackle in his voice.

“What do you mean, strange?” I ask.

“When I went back to the car to radio in about the deceased woman, I could of swore I saw someone standing back there, but when I turned away then back again, they were gone.”

“Did you go and check out the area?”

“No sir, I was honestly to shaken to leave my squad car at that point.” *Whoever did this was steps away from where we are now. If only he had taken the time to check.*

He starts to panic. “Oh god, I let the person who did this get away didn’t I?”

“Relax, we don’t know that for sure yet. We completely understand why you may have not.” Roy says.

The young newcomer looks as if he is about to go off on the deep end if he does not calm down. Our conversation is interrupted by an officer informing us of something strange they found. I tell the kid to take a walk to settle himself down, then Roy and I head in the opposite direction. We followed the patrol officer to an area a few yards away from the body where a wooden cube sat on the grass.

“What the hell is that?” Roy asks.

I shrug feeling clueless as to why he asked me. Picking it up, he rotates it over on its bottom. There is a piece of yarn dangling from it. Roy flicks it.

“Please tell me you’re not thinking of pulling that string,” I say to him.

“You know me all too well. I kind of am.”

“Don’t you think we should you know, call it in to the bomb squad? What if there is an explosive device inside?”

“It’s not heavy at all, and I can’t hear any liquid either,” he says, shaking it.

“So, you’re a bomb expert?”

“It can’t be anything that bad.” He says nonchalantly tossing it to me.

My entire body became weak, and my heart fell into my stomach as I caught the cube in both hands. I can feel my ears begging to warm up from the anger building inside me. Why would he do something so careless and stupid? I swear sometimes I think he does not have any common sense at all. Roy can be very childish and not take the job seriously at times. That agitates the hell out of me.

Before I can react, something inside vibrates, startling me. I fumble with the device, dropping it, watching as it falls to the ground and shatters.

“Are you out of your mind?” I yell jumping back.

“What the hell happened? Why did you toss it?”

“I don’t know, some shit vibrated inside!” I wipe my hands on my jacket, hoping there was nothing harmful on the outside of the cube. I don’t know what was inside, but it creeped me out for sure.

“What do you mean vibrate? Like a *buzz* vibrating,” he says making a sound with his mouth.

“You know what I mean, Roy. I don’t need you to make the noise.”

“Well, you sound pretty confused,” he says, straightening himself up.

“Listen, let’s just see what was inside.”

We both stand peering over the contents of the broken pieces. He squats down brushing away wood chips and notices a folded note with writing on it. “Look at this, some kind of message.” He says handing it to me.

All the letters were written in unique styles. A few were cut out of a magazine article and newspaper. The page itself looks aged and full of water damage. I glanced up at Roy and back at the paper and began to read aloud. “*The home where humility lives, Pride will hurt. If you had not suffered as you have, there would be no debt to you as a human being, no humility, no compassion. Suffrage is necessary for one’s survival. Just as nourishment is necessary for the soul. We are virtuous in the light but thrive off sin in the shadows. Shadows Killer.*”

For a moment, I was taken aback by the words. They sound eerily familiar like I have heard them before. A thought shoots through my mind like a lightning bolt. *There is no way it can’t be.*

I look towards Roy who is standing there with a blank stare, silent, and unmoving. I snap my fingers near his ear trying to break the current daze, he is in. He bit down on his lips to keep them from quivering and whipped away moisture from his cheek. As he turned to me, his troubled eyes screamed with pain. His face became flushed, turning a bright cherry red.

“Are you ok?” I ask, already knowing the answer to my own question.

“Those were the same words written on the note recovered from Jen’s body. I will never forget them because they still haunt me to this day.”

What he said hit me in the gut like a 300-pound boxer's punch. Words used by that psycho that left us both mentally and physically scared. A case that took so much from the both of us. A case I hope remained buried six feet deep.

"Michael Watts," he murmurs looking at the ground.

I place my hand on my chest. "Yeah, that's it, that's the son of a bitch's name. It brings back memories just hearing you say it."

He takes the paper from my hand analyzing it and points to small RW initials at the bottom. The ink is smeared but we can still make it out.

"This is different, I've never seen this prior to now."

"You've never seen what?"

"The RW wasn't on any of the original copies on the victims we found."

"Are you sure?" I ask.

He scrunches up his face. "Yes, James. Do you think I'm lying or something?"

"No, I don't. It was a long time ago, so I was wondering if that is all," I shrug.

"Doesn't matter if it was one hundred years ago. I am telling you it was not there."

His body language immediately begins to change, he's showing signs of annoyance, so I decide to back off for the moment.

"You think someone is trying to imitate him? I mean, it was a huge case that received national news coverage," I say.

"Whoever it is, I guess this is their way of letting us know they want to continue what he started," he says stuffing the note in his pocket.

I cannot begin to imagine what is running through his mind right now. Having to be reminded of such trauma and pain after so long. Dealing with the loss of someone you love at the hands of someone you despise. There are no words or actions that can take agony like that away. I can still feel the sting from that rusty blade, but my pain does not compare to his.

"After ten years, ten fucking years, why now?" he asks.

"I don't know my friend, but I intend for us to find out."

There are no words I can muster up as I watch my friend stand there, distraught, sliding his hands into his pockets. The

countless women he murdered including Jen, all the images of their lifeless bodies are seared into my brain. An act so wicked, so immoral, so evil. I can't even begin to explain.

Dark clouds roll in followed by the sound of thunderous *boom* rumbling across the sky. The first droplets of rain begin to fall upon my skin and the rest follow soon after. The weather is very fitting for the current mood.

"You guys finish up here; we're going to head back to the station," I tell the remaining officers.

"Why are we going there?" asks Roy.

"If this person is a copycat, then I think we should look over some of the old case files. That way we can try to get ahead of this thing before we have a severe problem on our hands." Roy nods his head in agreement as he turns to walk to his car.

"Listen, partner, if you're not up to—"

"I'm fine, trust me," he says, cutting me off.

I exhale. "Okay, but if your mind changes, I want to be the first to know."

He nods his head quickly while giving me a half smile. I watched him get into his car before entering my own. Once inside, I sit for a few moments, taking in all bizarre things that have happened thus far in the day. I grip the steering wheel with both hands, squeezing it as tight as I can, taking deep, slow breaths. I gather myself, starting the car, and putting it into drive. I have a hunch that today is going to be an interesting one. Roy and I both spent a lot of time getting over the nightmare of the past. Now it seems that it may be coming back to haunt us once again. But why? Why after all this time? I guess I will have to wait and see.