

CHAPTER 1

The withering heat of Bourbon Street pressed him deeper into the narrow alley. His sanguine demeanor belied his frustration and rage. Sweat trickled. His lips parted and heat burned down his throat. Finally, she arrived and worked her way through the milling crowd outside the Hotel Montelanne. He leaned forward as she moved toward the entrance and displayed her badge. His world flashed white as his pupils narrowed. An arrow of light from the gold shield had found him. When his vision cleared, she was gone....

* * *

The French Quarter housed many elegant turn-of-the-century hotels like the Montelanne. The lobby of marble, woven lavender, and blue twill seemed to covet the sweet floral scent of bougainvillea. The gilded walls arched toward a gaggle of chandeliers and sparkling lights. Detective Gates figured the rooms started around two bills and went up from there. Smiling, she remembered an old beau explaining the art of seduction: “The better the hotel, the better the sex.”

Across the lobby she saw a uniformed officer step into the elevator and hold the door.

“Hello Dorene.” It was Reese from the 83rd. “Where’s the new partner?” Reese needed a shave and stunk of cheap cigars. Gates stepped up to the control panel and punched the 14 button, though it was already lit. Her silence echoed in the slowly ascending elevator.

The activity centered around the west wing where several firemen were calling it quits. The uniform assigned to watch the victim’s door yawned, folded up a newspaper, and told Gates the details. His name was Franklin, from the 36th Precinct. It had been a false alarm. No real flames, just a smoldering single white female dead on the floor. The maid had been in the vicinity and responded to the alarm. He had called it in. Forensics had been notified.

Gates pulled on a pair of rubber gloves. Where the hell was Hill anyway?

“I hear it’s pretty grizzly in there,” Franklin warned as he swapped places

with Reese at the door.

Gates raised her finger to her lips. "Don't spoil it for me, Franklin."

Gates switched on her flashlight and tried the wall switch. Nothing. Apparently the fire department had killed power to the main breaker. She shined her beam of light along the plaster wall. No electrical panel here. Moving toward the tunnel of yellow light, she stepped into the foyer and froze as the curl of pungent smoke hit her.

"What's cookin'?" The voice from behind startled her.

Gates glared over her shoulder at her partner, Bruce Hill. He was out of breath and panting like an excited Pekingese. *Only a rookie would take the stairs*, thought Gates.

"See if you can find the breaker box," Gates instructed. Hill patted down the wall. Gates was no epicurean, but she knew the odor wasn't right. Now she became aware of a strange crackling sound – like the sound of cicadas droning? *Nah, too early*. The hiss was low, indecipherable and insistent. "You hear that?"

The lights switched on. They waited while their eyes adjusted.

"Holy Jesus!"

CHAPTER 2

She was naked except for what remained of a melted negligee coiled like a snake around her mid-section. A hot iron had sizzled through tissue and bone, leaking a darkening pool of fluid onto the smoking carpet.

Gates snapped out of it. "Unplug it." She pointed to the cord. She took out a handkerchief, covered her nose and mouth, and stepped back, the rancid smoke causing her eyes to water.

Hill yanked the cord from the wall.

A clouded blue eye stared out accusingly from the twisted face. The stench of burnt and decaying tissue hung like death's cruel veil concealing the image of the iron still branding its deep imprint into the fleshy part of the woman's abdomen. Gates swallowed hard.

Hill opened a window, allowing a fresh breeze to blow in. "I think I'm gonna puke." Hill moaned.

This was Hill's first homicide.

Gates instructed, "Check the other rooms. See if you can find some ID."

How many scenes had she been in where an innocent victim had taken their last breath? Each death different, but similar in its effect. It incised a piece of your soul.

Standing by the open window, Gates breathed in the cool night air. Distant lights from the Spanish Plaza shined through the sky heavy with smog – a rare glimmer of remote hope that someday things would change.

Gates dug out her notepad and began the slow, calculated inventory of the room's personal effects. With the exception of the overturned ironing board, and a nearby glass lying on its side next to a small wet stain on the carpet, the room looked intact. No obvious signs of a struggle.

Gates figured the woman had been facing the ironing board when the accident occurred. She fell backwards, pulling the hot iron with her. The body showed no obvious cuts, scratches, bite marks, abrasions, or bruising; evidence often associated with rape cases. She stooped over and smelled the damp stain beside the overturned glass. Scotch. Single malt and expensive.

Gates slid a gloved finger beneath the melted slip, searching for possible traces of semen.

Hill walked up packing an eel-skin wallet. He glanced down at the woman's raw, contorted face and then diverted his gaze, examining the picture on the airline's identification card.

"She wasn't bad looking," Hill commented.

Gates guessed the victim was in her late twenties, maybe earlier thirties. It was difficult to get a feel of how the woman looked under normal circumstances. Now, most of the tissue had been damaged, pulled taut under the intense heat like latex under a heat lamp. Gates noted the nails, manicured and painted by skilled hands. The skin around the nails and toenails had lost its pinkish color; common during the early stages of rigor mortis.

Gates picked up the victim's right hand.

"Shouldn't we wait for Forensics?" Hill asked.

Gates ignored the comment and inspected beneath the nails, looking for any traces of epidermis. Even through rubber gloves, Gates could feel the victim's contouring in the cold hand. As if the hand was Gates's window into the deceased's soul – a subjective history carved in skin. That had once been just a lot of metaphysical horseshit, but that was before logging ten years in Homicide in the Voodoo Queen's city.

Hill, busying himself in the closet, broke the silence. He pulled out a freshly pressed airline's uniform.

"My bet, she was getting ready for work," gesturing as he went along. "She irons her uniform and hangs it back up. Goes over to the ironing board. Maybe picks up her drink, takes a sip or two, sets the glass down and feels light-headed. Maybe she passes out and strikes her head on the floor. The iron goes with her, topples over onto her. She's either unconscious or too out of it to know what's happened. I had an uncle once that had low blood sugar. When he drank alcohol he'd pass out colder than a cucumber."

Hill returned the uniform to the closet. "You don't buy it, do you? Well, maybe she had a heart attack? Or maybe someone knocked her over, made it look like she fell? Or, maybe someone else ironed her uniform so we'd think she did it? You know how weird these sons-of-bitches can be."

Gates ignored the fact Hill was inexperienced and quick to form opinions. She needed quiet. She knew the evidence was in front of her.

"She doesn't fit the profile of a cardiac arrest," Gates reasoned. "It's possible she fainted...or had a mild seizure. I don't see any evidence of an overdose. You brought up a good point though. Maybe she's diabetic. Check for a medical tag."

Gates leaned toward the victim, ignoring the overpowering odor.

Something shiny and gold glistened on her neck. "I see something."

She lifted the victim's hair back from her neck. A tiny metallic face beckoned. Pulling a pair of well-worn tweezers from her personal tool kit, she attempted to lift the metal from the neck, but it held fast.

"There's marked indentations in the skin," Gates noted, staring down at where the skin had folded around the coin like a orchid enclosing on a dew drop. Maybe the heat from the iron...she risked damaging crucial evidence if she continued. Then she noticed a smudge – a possible fingerprint on the patina of the coin.

Gates put her tweezers away. "I don't think she fainted," Gates added. "See beneath the ligature, where the chain goes around the neck? There's bruising and discoloration. Let's look at the eyes. Pull back the lids." Hill hesitated, all thumbs, like a reluctant schoolboy conducting his first dissection. Losing patience, Gates pushed him aside. She pulled back the left eyelid. "See the small spotty hemorrhages? It's presumptive evidence of death by asphyxia. This was no accident."