

Mortal Sins



Penn Williamson

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1920s New Orleans: a city of bootleg gin, hot jazz, gangsters and voodoo. Slave shacks and swamps form the backdrop for gritty crime and dark, dark secrets... On a summer night in 1927, in a slave shack on his family estate, infamous lawyer Charles St Claire has been found brutally murdered. In the big house stands his wife. Remy Lelourie is a hometown girl made good – a glamorous Hollywood filmstar and one of the most beautiful women in America. She is covered in bruises and soaked in her husband's blood. As in any small town, suspects, lawyers and the police all know each other – and all of them know the prime suspect. Many, including the investigating detective, are her former lovers. As each works to his own agenda, the layers of deceit, entangled relationships and false pretensions build into a delicious and dark portrayal of unforgettable people, in a time and place like no other.

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Dedication

For Tracy Grant, beloved friend

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He stood naked on the sagging porch of the old slave shack, with moonlight burnishing his skin to the smooth ivory of a marble gravestone. He might have been waiting for his lover to come.

The night smelled of death, heavy and smothering. It was summer in New Orleans, when the streets steamed in the morning and the rain teemed in the evening, when the brown river flowed thick and muddy, and the bayous spread in a primal ooze of putrefying lily pads and crawfish. In the old St. Louis Cemeteries, where the raised crypts had cracked and sunk into the earth, water lapped at the rotting bones so that the sweet smell of decay rose into the air and took on the breath of resurrected life. A summer's night in New Orleans, rancid life and ripe death, and always—the heat.

The porch he stood on faced the Bayou St. John, although he could barely see it through the huge live oaks. Streamers of moss hung from the gnarled branches, limp in the still, heavy air. The water curved like a slow, silver snake around the low moon.

If he turned his head and looked across the yard he could have seen the big house. An heirloom of slender white colonnettes and broad galleries, and as much a part of him as his bones and breath.

If he turned his head he could have seen the window of his wife's bedroom, but he didn't need to look to see her as he was remembering her. Linen sheets twisted around her naked legs, lamplight pooling on her belly. Her eyelashes spiking shadows on the bones of her face.

He breathed, and the sultry air panted with him. He imagined her looking out her window now, seeing him standing naked in the night.

He turned and went inside, leaving the door open. His shadow leaped out ahead of him in the wash of the brass gasoliers. Years ago they had brought electricity out to the shack, but he loved the gaslight. Once, in his grandfather's time, slaves had lived in this place. Of course in those days the floor had been packed dirt, the furniture a rotting table and a stool or two, rough ticking stuffed with moss and swamp grass to sleep on. Certainly no green leather chairs, no ormolu-mounted bureau, no big brass bed. When he and his brother were boys, these two small rooms had served as a sort of *garçonnière*. Out here where their mama wouldn't have to let herself know better, he and Julius had indulged in a lot of expensive bourbon and cheap women. Sure enough, some sinning had gone on in those days, most of it his.

Most of the sins had been his, yes, but not all. Not all.

Pulled by memories, he looked through a curtain of blue glass beads and into the shadowed bedroom. He saw, in the silver shawl of moonlight floating through the gauzy bed netting, the sweet curve of a woman's breast.

His breath quickened, and a hot flush prickled his bare skin. "That you, darlin'?" he said.

He took a step and the netting stilled, the shadow disappeared. His excitement died, leaving behind a melancholy ache. He wanted suddenly to be done with it all. He wanted to live a life without old longings, free of the past and old sins. Free of new sins and all the chaos and pain in his mind.

He picked up his silk robe from where he'd left it lying on the floor and shrugged it on. He went to the bureau, and his hands shook as he opened the flat silver box that was filled with not cigarettes but shaved cocaine. With the blade of a penknife, he scraped up the fine white flakes, then spilled it onto the back of his wrist. He brought it up to his nose, snorting deep, blinking.

His lips pulled back from his teeth and his eyes opened wide as the rush hit him. Beyond the open door the knife-like leaves of the banana tree stirred, sounding to his ears like a hurricane. He could feel his heart beating hard now.

He took a silk handkerchief out of his robe pocket and wiped his nose. He poured a glass of absinthe and spiked it with more cocaine. He tossed back most of the cocktail in one long swallow. The rush hit him again, harder this time, making him shudder.

Time spun away from him, letting go. He stood, swaying, drifting, caught up in the unraveling threads of a dream. Something brought him back, a noise. The locusts in the canebrakes, singing for their mates. He sucked in a deep breath and felt his chest expand with the force of it, felt the oxygen feed his blood. His blood pulsed now with the locusts' scratching song.

And then they stopped.

A wicker rocking chair creaked out on the porch. He jerked, almost stumbling, to peer back through the open door. The chair was still. The beaded curtain clicked softly, and he spun back around. He held his breath now, listening, but he heard only the whirring of the ceiling fan and the dripping of rainwater off the fronds of the banana trees. The tripping thump of his own heart.

A chill moved down his spine, in spite of the oppressive heat. There was something dangerous about the night, a sense of ancient, predatory creatures stalking silently through the tall grass or flying among the trees on soundless wings.

He laughed.

The mosquito netting in the next room stirred again, flashing white across the corner of his eye. The netting floated open and a woman rose from the bed. A woman, naked, her body glowing silver as moonlit snow. A snow dream, he told himself. She's only a dream.

He took a step backward though, even if she was only a dream, and still she came toward him. The beaded curtain parted around her, clicking and clacking. Thick worms writhed in her hair and her face was flat and dead, the color of the old bones rotting in the cemetery down the road.

She raised her arm, and at the end of it was a cane knife. The blade, long and flaring, bled red with a liquid fire.

"No," he said, although even then he didn't really believe in what he was denying.

She came closer, the snow woman with the horrible dead face, and then he realized what he was seeing and he laughed again.

"Remy," he said, smiling, laughing. "Hey, you comin' to get me, baby?" He backed another step, grinding his hips a little now, almost dancing, and she followed. She liked to play at dangerous games, did Remy, but in the end they were only games. "Come on, come on, come and get me."

The cane knife slashed across his belly.

He grunted and looked down, he saw his flesh gape open and the blood well thick and black, and he wondered why it didn't hurt, and then he screamed.

The knife cut him again, lower, and his scream broke into a wail. Run, he had to run; he ran but the knife came after him, came for his eyes this time, and he threw up his hands to stop it. The blade sliced across his palms, and he saw a finger go flying, but it wasn't real and so he laughed, and then he screamed, and then he whimpered. "Please," he said, as the knife slashed again. He opened his mouth and the screams filled it so he couldn't breathe, rising and swelling in his throat like big wet bubbles.

He could hear her harsh panting in a wet darkness now filled with pain. He wanted her to stop so that he could breathe again, so that he could scream. He wanted to tell her he was sorry. He wanted her to understand that he wasn't supposed to die.

He fell instead, and still she came. To cut out his heart with her knife.

He was slipping down, down deep into a hot black cocoon, his chest bursting, burning. His eyes filled with a black light, and then the light brightened into a whiteness and the world became new and sweet again. Night rain still dripped off the fronds of the banana trees, but the camellias outside the window smelled of tomorrow's sunshine, and she was kissing him, warm, lingering kisses, her lips begging him to stay, and he didn't want to go.

Slowly, he turned his head and looked up into her face. The screams were still trapped in his throat, beating like moths against glass. He opened his mouth to say her name one last time.

It came out in a gush of hot blood.

[Chapter One](#)

Blood was splattered and sprayed all over the walls and furniture. It lay in dark smears on the oiled wooden floor and pooled beneath the dead man's cut throat, glossy and syrupy, like blackberry wine.

Daman Rourke stood just within the shack's open door and tried not to breathe in the rank smell. He winced as the magnesium explosion of a flashlamp illuminated for an obscene moment the gashes in the dead man's white flesh and his bulging, glassy eyes.

"Sweet mercy," Rourke said.

The cop with the camera cast him a glance and then leaned over and pointed the lens at a cane knife that lay glued to the floor by a puddle of blood. "Day, my man. Welcome to the party," he said, as the flashlamp blew with another burst of white light. "Where you been at? I've had guys looking for you in every gin and hot pillow joint this side of the river."

Rourke resisted the urge to rub his hands over his face. It was past midnight at the end of a long day, beneath his linen suit coat his shirt was sticking to his back like wet paper, he had a scotch-and-rye headache throbbing behind his left eye, and he hated the smell of blood.

He shoved his hands in his pockets and smiled. "What can I say? I guess you didn't look in low enough places."

The other man's thick shoulders, which had been hunched up around his ears, relaxed. The smile worked, as always. Daman Rourke could charm anybody, and he knew it. Sometimes he did it for a reason, and sometimes just to get in the practice.

Rourke stayed where he was and let his partner come to him. The other cop's loose pongee suit was rumpled and sweat-stained, and his sparse light brown hair stuck up like tufts of salt grass on a sand dune. In this, the year of our Lord 1927, Fiorello Prankowski was the only homicide dick in the City That Care Forgot who wasn't Irish, but then he had been born and raised in Des Moines, and allowances were made for Yankees, who couldn't be expected to know better.

"The stiff's Charles St. Claire," he said. Fio had a sad, haggard face, as if all the cares New Orleans had forgotten he felt obliged to remember. "But then I guess I don't need to tell you that, since you both were probably altar boys together at St. Alphonsus, where you used to jerk off Saturday afternoons in the sacristy. Your mama likes to tell the story of how she got a little tipsy at his mama's wedding, and you, you bastard, once tried to screw his sister."

"Charles St. Claire never had a sister."

"Know him well, do you?"

"No," Rourke said, which was not the same thing as saying he wasn't acquainted with the man at all.

He knew it drove Fio crazy that in a city of half a million people, everybody was connected to everyone else—through blood or marriage, through shared secrets and shared desires. All those connections formed concentric and interlocking circles that no outsider could ever penetrate or understand.

Neither living nor dying in New Orleans was ever completely and truly what it seemed, but the trappings, the traditions, the rituals were all enshrined and made inviolate by a collective act of faith. You buried your family secrets deep and spun intricate, invisible webs to hide your sins from yourselves and from the world. And sometimes, thought Rourke, it was far better that the sins stayed hidden, the secrets safe.

"The Ghoul is here," Fio said, pointing his chin at the corpse, and at the man who was squatting over it.

Not that anyone could have missed him, for he had the thick, blubbery roundness of a walrus. The cops called him the Ghoul because he always smelled of rotting flesh. He spent his life in the bowels of the Criminal Courts Building, cutting open dead bodies and examining disgusting specimens under microscopes, drawing conclusions too wild ever to be admitted into court.

The feelings of aversion and distrust were mutual. Moses Mueller, coroner for New Orleans Parish for less than a year, already held to the firm belief that the collective intelligence of all the detectives on the force was only slightly above that of a mollusk.

“So what’s he think?” Rourke asked as he made his reluctant way to the body. He hated looking at dead things.

“You asking me?” Fio said, following after and rolling his shoulders like a horse with an itch. “You know the Ghoul—he never gives us squat. He told me it was murder, like I was supposed to run out and stop the presses. Hell, I had to give up on my theory that the stiff went chasing himself around the room hacking at himself with a cane knife.”

The Ghoul had leaned over to sniff at the corpse’s gaping, blood-caked mouth. “Oh, man,” Fio said. “Why does he *do* stuff like that?”

Rourke was trying to keep from stepping in the blood. It had dried in some places, in stacks like glossy black tiles scattered on the floor, but in other places it was still wet and sticky, and he had just bought his expensive-as-hell alligator wing tips with last week’s winnings at the track. No matter how low he did go, he always went there in style.

Charles St. Claire had not died in style. His paisley silk robe gaped open, revealing naked flesh that had been literally bled white. His throat had been slit, his chest cavity ripped open, and his guts oozed out of a cut in his belly. A slash across his pelvis had left his penis hanging by a small string of what looked like gristle.

The Ghoul was smelling the corpse’s hair now. Ash from the burning cigarette that drooped from a corner of his mouth sifted down into Charles St. Claire’s open and glazed gray eyes.

Rourke almost flinched, half expecting those eyes to blink. With his gaping throat and his eyes wide open and filmed with a milky caul, the dead man almost seemed to be wearing a look of laughing surprise. *Death: life’s one sure thing. So what’s the matter, Charlie St. Claire? Weren’t you ready?* The trouble is, Rourke thought, it was easy to forget what a playful trickster was good of’ Death. How, like a naked girl popping out of your birthday cake, he could still catch you bright-eyed and smiling foolishly.

The Ghoul had lifted the dead man’s hand to peer at it closely. It had a deep gash across the palm and was missing a middle finger, but a gold watch and diamond pinkie ring glittered in the light from the flickering gasoliers.

“Any ideas as to when it happened?” Rourke asked as he hunkered down on his heels beside the body.

The coroner wiped the sweat off his upper lip. Cigarette smoke curled in steady streams out his nostrils. “Certainly not within the last hour or two or, perhaps, even three—regrettably one cannot be more precise.” His words, as usual, were very precise, although with a flavor of the Old World about them. “Rigor mortis has started to set in in the eyelids and cheek muscles.”

“He talks to you,” Fio said. “How come he only talks to you?”

“He likes me.” Rourke leaned over for a better look at the knife. It was heavy, wide-bladed, and hooked, and was supposed to be used for cutting sugarcane. “Well, diddy-wah-diddy,” he said on a soft whistle. For a thumbprint, flashy as a neon sign, was etched in blood at the top of the blade.

“If that quaint colloquialism is meant to convey awe,” the Ghoul said, “then I find I must agree with it.” He pushed back up to his feet, his bulk shifting in lurches. “Such splendid arches and loops and whorls, and all distinct enough to be seen even with the naked eye. But before we do too much celebrating, I should point out that they could belong to the victim, who might have tried to wrest the weapon away from his attacker. Although it is, of course, always dangerous to speculate.”

“Yeah? So maybe I’ll just go on ahead and speculate that they’re the killer’s anyway. Just for what the hell.” Not, Rourke thought, that he could count on it mattering. Many juries in New Orleans still tended to view the evidence of fingerprints as just so much hoodoo.

“Hey, get a look at this,” Fio said. He had knelt to peer under a green leather wing-backed chair and now he lumbered back up, laughing. “It’s the poor bastard’s finger. His diddling finger.” He laughed again and tossed the severed digit between the dead man’s sprawled legs. “Better wrap

it on up with the rest of him. What with his dick only swinging by a thread, he's gonna be needing something bonier to use on the chippies in hell."

Moses Mueller stared at the big cop, blinking against the cigarette smoke that floated before his face. "You are speaking," he said, "of a man."

"Hunh?" Fio said, and Rourke had to look down to hide a smile.

The smile faded, though, as he slowly stood with his gaze still on the dead man's face, on the sightless eyes. It wasn't so long ago some cops believed that the retinas captured their final view of life, like a photograph. Daman Rourke wished he could believe that those dying eyes had come to grasp all the truths that the living man had failed to see, but he knew that for a vain hope. If anything lingered in the eyes of the dead, it was what they had last felt in their hearts. Surprise, fear, perhaps, and an immense regret that this time the dying was happening to them, and that it was all, finally, going to be too late.

He lifted his head to find the coroner's eyes, small and hard like buckshot, studying him. "You have not asked me how he died, Lieutenant."

Fio blew a snort out his bent nose. "Gee. Maybe the cane knife and the big red grin he's wearing across his throat are some kinda clues."

"He drowned," Rourke said.

Fio laughed, but the Ghoul's shaggy eyebrows had lifted a little. He even took the cigarette out of his mouth long enough to almost smile. "You surprise me," he said.

He went to the back of the green leather chair, where he'd taken off an old-fashioned frock coat that was so worn in places it shone. He slung the coat over his shoulder while his gaze took a slow gander around the room, returning at last to the two detectives.

"Someone, or something, either evil or desperate, took a long, sharp implement, most likely a cane knife, and slashed it in a backhanded blow across the victim's throat—severing the jugular vein, the carotid artery, and the windpipe, with the result that the air passage filled with blood." He lit a fresh cigarette from the butt of the old one, then anchored a battered black fedora on his head. "Charles St. Claire did quite literally drown in his own blood."

He stopped on his way out the door to take one last look at the corpse. "This was not a quick way of dying, you understand. Not even in the final moments, after his throat had been slit open. It would have taken him a very long three or four minutes to die, and he would have spent that time in an agony of terror and pain."

He took a step, then paused again, half turning. The rotting porch groaned beneath his weight. "And it was likely that he was right-handed. The murderer, I am speaking of."

"He?" Rourke said.

The Ghoul stared off down the drive, where his chauffeured green Packard awaited him. The tip of his cigarette seemed to pulse red in time with his thoughts, then he sighed, shrugged, and began to make his slow, ponderous way down the steep and narrow steps. His voice came back to them from out of the night. "It could have been a woman."

"Well, la-di-da and kiss my achin' ass," Fio said once they'd heard the Packard's engine start up and its tires crunch on the oyster-shell drive. He fished a cigar out of his shirt pocket and scratched a match on his thumbnail. He turned, grinning, and winked at his partner as he curled his lips around the end of the cigar and drew deep to light it. "Drowned, hunh?"

The tobacco caught and he took the cigar out of his mouth, waving it through the air and trailing smoke. "Jesus, I don't know what stinks worse—the stiff or the Ghoul."

The smoke did help cut the rank smell, for Fio indulged in only the finest Havana Castle Morros. They were part of the juice he got for pretending not to know about the numbers running going on in the back room of a certain pipe and tobacco shop on the corner of Rampart and Bienville.

Rourke said nothing. He stuffed his hands in his pockets and walked around the small room, forcing himself to look at things, to think and not feel, and there was no way, really, to keep from

stepping in the blood. He wondered if a place like this old slave shack could have a memory. If inanimate things like wood and stone could absorb pain and sorrow and fear like a sponge. If so, he thought, then these walls ought to be weeping, and long before now.

He found himself looking at the top of an ormolu-mounted bureau. At a tipped-over glass, a penknife, and a silver cigarette case—all coated with aluminum and carbon powders. Fio dusting for more fingerprints. Fio, his partner, who he would have to remember was much, much smarter than he looked.

Rourke dipped his finger in the dregs left in the glass and licked, and tasted absinthe and the cold, numbing bite of cocaine.

He closed his eyes for a moment, his hand curling into a fist.

He pushed abruptly away from the bureau and brushed through a glass-beaded curtain, into the second room. The beads clattered again as Fio followed in his wake. Fio, his partner, who had the air now of a man anticipating the moment when he would be able to spring the punch line of a joke he'd been dying to tell.

It was a small space and the brass bed filled it. The mosquito netting draped open, and the counterpane was a little wrinkled, as if someone had sat or lain there, but only for a moment. A small rag rug lay crooked on the floor and looked out of place, but then it hadn't always been there.

If he lifted it, Daman Rourke knew what he would find. Because some stains, some crimes, could never be washed away.

He went to the window instead.

"You know," Fio said from behind him, "how you figure it's a good bet that the person who found the corpse is the person who made the corpse ..."

The window was open but the air outside was hot and still. You couldn't see much, with the way the bamboo and banana trees crowded against this back part of the shack. You could stand behind that curtain of green, though, shielded from sight, and watch what went on in this room, on this bed. He knew, because once he had done so.

"So who did find him?" Rourke finally asked, although he knew that as well. God help him, but he knew.

Fio plucked the cigar out of his mouth. He moved his jaw as though chewing his thoughts, then his battered face split into a wide grin.

"Cinderella."

They called her the most beautiful woman in the world.

Her image was everywhere, in rag sheets and magazines, on candy boxes and postcards. It flickered on the silver screens of movie palaces, and on the midnight stages of a million erotic dreams.

The newspapers called her the Cinderella Girl sometimes too. It came from the first movie she had made, *The Glass Slipper*—a dark and sultry interpretation of the classic fairy tale. It was the role that had shot a young woman by the improbable name of Remy Lelourie into the galaxy of celluloid stardom. The world had seen nothing like her, before or since.

For it wasn't only her beauty—which was a strange kind of beauty anyway, with her eyes set too far apart and her face too bony, her mouth too wide. She seduced you in a way you didn't dare confess, not even to your priest. You looked at her and you saw a raw hunger and desperation for life, not redemption and not salvation, but *life*. The down-and-dirty kind of life that happened on a hot, wet night, in a seedy room, with whiskey and desire burning in your blood.

You looked at her, thought Daman Rourke, and you saw sin. Dangerous, delectable, unaccountable sin.

He stood in the middle of the yard and looked at the old French colonial house. He hadn't come near her yet and already he felt the pull of her. "Remy," he said, seeing how it would feel to say her name again after all this time.

He stayed where he was, not moving, looking toward the bayou now. A wind had come up, rattling the banana trees and bringing with it the smell of sour mud and dead water. He saw a pair of lantern lights floating among the dead cypress, where Negro boys often gigged for frogs at night.

A hundred years ago this place had been a sugar plantation, before the city had grown up around it. Only a few acres and the house remained, but her beauty and charm were there still. In her tall and elegant windows, in the finely carved colonnettes and balustrades. In the wide galleries that spread all around her, like the dancing skirts of a southern belle. The man who built the house had called her Sans Souci. *Free of worry, without a care.*

The spell was broken by the chug and rattle of the coroner's hearse turning down the drive, come to take away the earthly remains of Charles St. Claire, who was free now of not only worry but everything else.

A gaggle of reporters with cameras slung over their shoulders was riding on the running boards, and the sight of them sent Rourke sprinting the rest of the way across the yard to the house and up onto the shadowed gallery. Light from the headlamps bounced off the brass uniform buttons of a beat cop, who stood at stiff attention in front of the door.

Rourke showed him his gold shield. "Sure is a hell of a hot night for it," he said, and smiled.

The patrolman, who looked barely out of school, read the name on the badge and stiffened up even straighter. "Lieutenant Rourke, sir?" he said, wariness and wonder both in his voice. His round, freckled face was red and sweating beneath his scuttle-shaped hard hat.

Rourke turned up the wattage on his smile. He had no illusions that the young man's awed reaction had anything to do with Lieutenant Daman Rourke's sterling reputation as an ace detective. Even being Irish and the son of a cop wasn't going to take you from walking a beat to carrying a detective lieutenant's badge by the time you were thirty. Promotions can come fast and easy, though, when your father-in-law is the superintendent of the New Orleans Police Department.

"Are you feeling generous tonight?" Rourke said.

The patrolman swallowed so hard his Adam's apple disappeared into his collar. "Sir, I ... Sir?"

The reporters were leaping off the running boards now as the meat wagon rolled to a stop. They would go first to the slave shack to pop photographs of the body. Pictures too gory to be printed, but not too gory to be passed around and cracked wise over in the newsroom.

Rourke brushed past the young cop, flashing another smile as he did so. "So be a pal, then," he said, "and promise them anything short of a night with your sister, but keep those press guys out of my face."

The boy finally relaxed, grinning. "Well, I don't got me a sister, but I know what you mean. Sir?"

Rourke paused, the cypress door swinging open beneath his hand.

"She couldn't have done it. Not Remy Lelourie. Could she?"

Rourke crossed over the threshold, saying nothing. He entered a hall that was wide and cool beneath a high ceiling fan, and sweet with the smell of oiled wood. The sliding doors between the double parlors were thrown open, and he could see into rooms that were dressed for summer in flowered slipcovers and rush mats. The French windows were open to the night, and a breeze stirred their long saffron draperies.

A small, slender woman in a gray silk dress stood before a yellow marble fireplace with her back to the door, her head bent. Her dark hair was cut boyishly short, baring her long neck. Her legs were bare as well, her feet caked and splattered with dried blood.

Rourke had to stop a moment and lean against the jamb. It was a strange high, to be seeing her again and with the smell of blood filling his head. A high as powerful as any that came from a glass of absinthe and cocaine.

"Hey, Remy," he said. "How you doin', girl?"

Slowly she turned, lifting her head. The softly tragic expression on her face looked drawn there as if by a knife. For a moment the wrench of memory was so strong he nearly choked on it.

“Day,” she said, and that was all, but hearing it tore something loose inside him.

He walked up to her, holding her fast with his gaze. She waited for him, allowing him to look, daring him to see behind her eyes. The front of her dress looked like someone had taken a bucket of blood and drenched her with it. She even had blood in her hair.

Her right hand was pressed to the hollow between her breasts, as though he had startled her. Her fingers were wrapped around a stained handkerchief that had been twisted into a ragged string. He took her hand and she let him, her eyes the whole time on his face. Her eyes were exactly how he remembered them, wide-spaced and tilted up at the corners. Dark brown with golden lights, like tiny bursting suns.

He unwrapped the makeshift bandage. A ragged cut gaped open across her palm from little finger to thumb.

“Why did you do it, Remy?” he said.

She wrenched free of him and turned away, gripping her elbows with bloodstained hands. She didn’t appear to be wearing anything underneath that single sheath of blood-soaked silk.

Rourke leaned against the mantel and stuffed his fists deep into his pockets. He allowed the space between them to empty into a hard silence, but she didn’t fill it with any words. To Fio she’d spun a tale that she had been in bed, asleep, when she’d been awakened by screams coming from the old slave shack and she had gone out there to find her husband expelling his last breath through a rip in his throat.

“Now this was supposed to’ve been around nine o’clock, you understand,” Fio had said. “But it was a whole two hours later when Miss Beulah, the colored lady who does for the family, comes down to the kitchen for something or other and she looks out the window and thinks something ‘ain’t quite right’ about the shack. So she goes on out to see what’s what, and lo and behold ‘what’ turns out to be Cinderella covered in blood, sitting ’longside of Prince Charming here, rocking back and forth and telling him over and over how sorry she is about it all.”

Rourke took a step closer to her. “You going to tell me what happened?”

She raised her head as though meeting the challenge, but her voice when she spoke was dry and scratchy, as if she’d spent the night weeping. Or screaming.

“Why? What good will it do, when you’ve already made up your mind not to believe me?”

“Just think of it as a dress rehearsal for the jury, then, because things sure don’t look good, baby. You saying you sat there and stared at the gaping raw wound of your husband’s slit throat for all that time and did nothing.”

The banjo clock on the wall chose that moment to strike one o’clock, and she flinched as if the soft gong had been a blow. “He was ... there was this awful gurgling sound, Day, and all this blood came spurting out his mouth. It was like he was trying to talk to me, to tell me something, but I couldn’t, couldn’t ... And then the next thing I remember is hearing Beulah scream.”

“Yeah, I guess a couple hours of time must’ve just sort of slipped away from you there. It does that sometimes after an absinthe and happy dust cocktail.”

“That was Charlie’s poison. And yours, or so I’ve heard tell.” She had lifted her head again, met his eyes again.

Her mouth trembled and twisted into a smile, but it was a wry one, full of memories and pain. “We’ve always been willing to believe the worst about each other, haven’t we, Day?”

All he could manage was a shake of his head.

She held his gaze a moment longer, then the smile faded from her face and she turned away. He watched her in silence while she picked up a mother-of-pearl smoking set from off the mantel. He waited until she fitted a cigarette into the holder and lit a match before he said, “Who was your husband sleeping with, besides you?”

The flame trembled slightly, but that was all. “Now, whatever would Charles want with anyone else, when he already possessed the most beautiful woman in the world?”

He watched as the wild self-derision burned sudden and bright in her eyes. That cruel and destructive pulse of wildness that had once, long ago, seduced them both over the edge.

Jesus save me, he thought.

He cleared his throat. “Uh-huh. And how often did he beat you?”

Her hand flew up quicker than she could stop it, although she tried. It got as far as her neck, and so she pressed her palm there as if feeling for a pulse. The color around the bruise on her cheek drained away, so that it stood out as stark as a smudge of soot.

“Oh, this little ol’ thing ... You remember how the rain came up so hard and fast this evenin’? Well, I went to close the windows and the wind caught one of the shutters and it up and smacked me right in the face.” She breathed a soft, girlish laugh, and he almost laughed himself at this vision of Remy Lelourie suddenly turning into a southern belle with cotton bolls for brains.

“Cut the shuck, Remy,” he said. “One thing you’ve never been is a magnolia blossom.”

She put the cigarette down in an ashtray without having smoked it and wrapped her arms around herself again. “And you’ve always been one mean, tough bastard, haven’t you?”

“Somebody has to be. And here’s another interesting fact for you: The human body holds about ten pints of blood, and Charles St. Claire left most of his splattered all over the floor and ceiling and walls of an old slave shack on his way to being hacked to death with a cane knife. Now, Lord knows I was never all that fond of poor Charlie, but that sort of last moment I’d reserve only for my worst enemy, and I got this sick feeling in the pit of my gut that the big fat juicy thumbprint on that knife is going to turn out to be yours. Was he your worst enemy, *Mrs. St. Claire*?”

Her eyes had grown wide and stark. “I might have touched it—the knife. It was stuck in his chest. I tried to pull it out, but it was caught on...on something ... and blood was spraying all around us, and then... then all at once it came gushing up out of his throat.” Her hands fell to her sides and she looked down at herself as if suddenly just realizing what a mess she was. “It got all over me.”

She lifted her head and there was a wounded look on her face now, and he wondered, as he’d always wondered, which of all the Remy’s in the world was the real one. “They wouldn’t let me take a bath,” she said. “When can I take a bath?”

“You’ll have to take off all you’re wearing in front of your maid, so’s she can pass it along to us. Then tomorrow mornin’ you’re going to have to come on down to the Criminal Courts Building and give us your fingerprints.”

“Oh, God, Day. You’re not just ... You really do believe I ...” He watched her eyes brighten and grow wet with tears. Even though he knew it for the act that it was, he also thought that maybe a few things were getting through to her at last. That while she might be Remy Lelourie and the most beautiful woman in the world, there were going to be some in the city of New Orleans at least who would believe she had done this terrible thing.

He pressed his shoulder hard into the mantel to keep from touching her. She was still the most dangerous moment of his life. She had lied to him and used him and left him, hurt him in ways uncountable and unmeasurable, but he’d always wanted her anyway. He had never stopped wanting her.

“You remember how I worked the docks that summer, unloading banana boats? How I always had welts all over my hands and arms from getting bit by the rats and spiders that lived in those banana bunches?”

“Day.” She had said his name on a sigh.

“’Cause I remember it. Just like I remember other stuff about that summer,” he said. “Welts on his hands and welts on his heart. “Like how you cried that last afternoon. Big fat crocodile tears, just like these.” He was cupping her face, gathering up her tears as if he would keep them.

“I loved you,” she said. “I loved you so bad it almost killed me.”

“You were slumming. And—funny thing—but this is the part I remember best: You were the one who left.”

She wrapped her fingers around his wrist and held his hand in place so that she could turn her head and brush her lips across his palm, and the wetness of her mouth mixed with her tears. “I was afraid. Of you, Day. I wonder if you’ve any idea how frightening you can be.”

Him frightening. That was a laugh. He leaned closer, until only a breath-space separated their mouths. He was opening the throttle wide now, putting his money down.

“You were always good, darlin’, the best I’ve ever seen, and worth every bit of the ten G’s a week they were paying you out in Hollywood.” Her fingers were pressing hard on the pulse in his wrist, so that it seemed his blood flowed into hers. “But just like any two-bit hooker who finds herself owned by a cheatin’, heavy-handed pimp, one day you up and killed your man.”

He took a step back, pulled loose from her, let go of her. His face felt as though it were made of lead, but his breathing was fast and hard.

“You killed him, Remy girl. And I’m going to nail you for it.”

Chapter Two

A specter folk called the gowman was said to haunt the cypress swamp beyond the Faubourg St. John. Dressed all in white and prowling the night, the gowman lured his victims to a hideous death. He murdered the innocent, but what he did afterward was worse: He stole away the corpses he made, so there would be no body for friends and loved ones to view at the wake, no casket to put in the crypt. To those old Creole families like the St. Claires and the Lelouries, those families whose names, like their cypress houses, had been built to last forever, such a fate was beyond bearing.

The gowman was innocent of this murder at least, thought Daman Rourke as he watched the coroner’s hearse roll back down the drive. For this funeral there would be a wake and a casket, and a widow.

He leaned on the balustrade of the upstairs gallery and watched the wind blow fresh rain clouds back across the moon. Before he’d allowed her to go upstairs and get out of her bloody dress, he had gone up and taken a look at her bedroom. At her big tester bed with its canopy of rose garlands and frolicking cupids. At the semen stains on the messed sheets.

At her cloche hat and pearls laid out on her dressing table, a pair of stockings draped over the back of a chair, her shoes lined up beside it. At her tapestry valise stuffed so full of clothes, and done in such a hurry, that one of the straps wouldn’t fasten—as if she’d packed up and gotten ready to run before she’d killed him.

But then people never change, and she had run before.

The old cypress floorboards creaked beneath Fiorello Prankowski’s heavy tread as he joined Rourke at the gallery railing. Fio hooked a hip on the worn wood, folded his arms across his chest, and stared at his partner.

“You gotta figure the wife for doing it,” he said.

“Yes.” The word tasted sour in Rourke’s mouth. The way he’d behaved with her in there—like the jilted lover he once was, who had wanted to make her hurt as much as he was hurting, who had wanted to make her suffer, and never mind that whatever pain he might have owed her was eleven years too late.

Fio flipped his cigar butt out into the night. “Blood all over her, those missing two hours, and the maid finding her with the body, crying about bein’ so sorry. Yeah, she did it, all right, as sure as I’m a poor Italian-Polack boy from Des Moines. And ain’t it almost always the one who is supposed to love you best,” he said, voicing an old cop truism. “Her story’s pretty half-assed, but it might hold up. I mean it’s gonna be tough to find a jury who’ll send Remy Lelourie upriver to fry, even for killing her old man.”

“Even tougher if enough folk figure he was asking for it.”

“Was he?”

From where they were, up on the second-story gallery, you could look across the bayou water and see the lights of the gates to City Park, where seventy years ago, beneath a grove of live-oak trees, a St. Claire had shot a Lelourie to death in a duel over lost honor and a game of faro.

“I played a game of *bourré* with the gentleman once,” Rourke said. “Charles St. Claire had no fear, and no limit.”

“Hunh, you should talk. So who won?”

“I did.”

Fio huffed a laugh. “There you go ... Everybody’s got something, though. If he didn’t have fear, what did he have?”

“Money, pride, greed, lust. And secrets.” Rourke smiled. “All of the usual southern deadly sins.”

“Aw, man, don’t tell me that. What secrets?”

“He had a sterling silver name, and juice in all the high and mighty places, but he’s been a hophead for years, and one who really got his kicks out of walking on the wild side. He liked to use people—men, but especially women. And then he liked making them pay for the privilege of being used.”

Fio had turned his head back around to look at him, and Rourke could feel the dissecting edge in the other man’s gaze.

“He was also,” Rourke went on, “the only white Creole lawyer around these parts with enough brass to defend a Negro in court, and on rare occasions he even won. That Charles St. Claire was able to save a few sorry black asses from a life of hoeing sweet potatoes and cutting cane on an Angola chain gang—well, certain folk will tell you that was his very worst sin.”

“And what will they tell me is Remy Lelourie’s very worst sin?”

“That she left us all those years ago. Or tried to.”

Fio waited two slow beats before he said, “I know you want her to be innocent, but she probably isn’t, so don’t—” He cut himself off, blowing a big breath through his teeth.

“Don’t what?” Rourke said.

“Don’t let it break your heart this time.”

“This time?” For a moment Rourke wondered how much his partner knew—if he’d heard something somewhere, a whisper, a rumor. It was impossible, though. The real secrets, the sins, were buried too deep. Only he and Remy knew what had really happened down in that slave shack eleven years ago, and Remy would never tell.

Fio shrugged. “I’m only saying, she’s young and beautiful and it’s an ugly thought that she’s responsible for that mess down there.” He waved his hand in the direction of the slave shack. “But you always end up letting yourself care about them too much, the murdered ones and their murderers—you care too much and they end up breaking your heart.”

Rourke stared at the other cop, letting an edgy silence fall between them. “You done?”

“Yeah, I’m done.”

Rourke stared at Fio some more, then he smiled and shook his head. He waited until Fio smiled back at him, and then he said, “Jesus, Prankowski. You are so full of shit.”

He pushed off the balustrade, turning his back on the bayou. His headache was blinding now, and his legs and arms felt weightless, invisible, as if he were disappearing back into the past where once they had been, he and Remy.

“You know,” Fio said as they left the house by the back gallery stairs, “that’s the part about all of this that I don’t get the most. She had it all—she was a friggin’ movie star, for Christ’s sake. So what did she come back here for, to up and marry a man like St. Claire?”

“Maybe it was true love.”

“Yeah? Then true love sure doesn’t last long. When did they tie the knot—back in February sometime? That makes it five months.”

They crossed the yard to the oaks that lined the drive, where Rourke had parked his Indian Big Chief motorbike. It had started to rain again, in large, fat drops.

He had straddled the leather seat and kick-started the engine when Fio's big hands gripped the handlebars and he leaned over, bringing his face close to Rourke's. "You mind telling me where you're going? Partner."

Rourke stared back at him, but his answer when it came was mild enough. "To a speak."

"If you need a drink, I got a flask in my pocket."

"I'm looking for a woman. You got one of those in your pocket too?"

Fio blew his breath out. In the white light from the bike's headlamp, his face looked drained of blood the way Charles St. Claire's had been. "What do you know that you're not telling me?"

"Nothing," Rourke lied, smiling so it would go down easy.

He rolled down the drive and along the bayou road until he turned onto Esplanade Avenue, where he opened the Indian's throttle into a roar and tore down the rainslick pavement. The bike shuddered between his legs, and the hot, wet wind slapped him in the face, while a saxophone wailed "Runnin' Wild" in his head.

Three years before, a Prohibition agent—strictly in the name of research, of course—had decided to prove how easy it was for a thirsty man to buy himself a glass of hooch in various cities throughout the dry country. It took him a whole twenty-one minutes to find and make his illegal purchase in Chicago. It took him three minutes in Detroit.

In New Orleans it took him thirty-five seconds.

Daman Rourke wasted even less time that wet and bloody summer's night, but then he knew where he was going.

The speakeasy was on Dumaine Street, masquerading as a laundry, although a few shirts occasionally did get boiled in the big copper tubs out back. Enough so that you could detect a faint smell of soap and scorched starch beneath the reek of tobacco smoke and booze-soaked sawdust.

Rourke leaned his elbows on the water-marked bar and ordered a scotch and rye from a slope-shouldered, slack-lipped man in a greasy apron. When the man came with his drink, Rourke put his dollar down. The bartender figured him for a cop and so he didn't pick the money up, but Rourke would leave it lie anyway, for no matter how low he did go, he always went there in style and he always paid his own way.

The hooch was good, straight off the boat from Honduras, and still it burned when it hit his belly. Tonight, the speak seemed sad and quiet. From the back room drifted the clatter of billiard balls and the murmur of men playing cotch. A man in a red-striped vest slumped, passed out, at a piano, his black hands gently folded together on the silent ivory keys as if in prayer.

Yet under the tarnished light of a copper-shaded lamp, a couple danced anyway, lost in music only they could hear. Feet shuffling in a slow drag, bellies pressed close, hips grinding together in a parody of love. The woman's tawdry yellow dress was coming unraveled at the hem, her brassy hair was black at the roots, and her eyes were clenched tightly shut. As if not looking was as good as not knowing.

When the bartender came back to see if he wanted another, Rourke nodded, even though his headache was now pounding loud as a Mardi Gras band. "Last time I was in here," he said, "must've been, oh, 'bout a week back—you had a gal singin' the heartbreak blues so damn fine. Made a man want to crawl into bed with a full bottle and a willin' woman, and drown his sorrows deep in the both of them."

Rourke paused to trace a pattern through the water rings with his finger, and when he looked back up his smile was backwoods friendly, with just a hint of bashfulness in it, as if he hadn't tried this particular game before and was seeing how far he could go with it. "Since then, well, I just haven't been able to get that lil' gal's song out my mind."

The bartender took a vague swipe at the scarred wood with a corner of his apron, while he sucked on his fat bottom lip and tried to assess if the cop leaning on his bar was looking to get laid or be put on the pad. “You’re pro’bly thinkin’ of Lucille. Only thing is, she said she wasn’t feelin’ so hot this evenin’, so I told her to take it off.”

“What a cryin’ shame,” Rourke said, while inside he felt sick, and cold with fear at the trouble he could see coming his way. Lucille’s way. Lucille, who should have been here in this speak, singing the blues, and yet wasn’t, and so she probably had no alibi now for where she had been while Charlie St. Claire was out in that shack, drowning in his own blood.

The bartender chewed on his lip some more, while his gaze flitted everywhere but on Rourke’s face. Finally he leaned forward and lowered his voice to a hoarse, whiskey-fed whisper.

“If it’s a hankerin’ for blackberries you got, there’s a place ’round the corner on Burgundy. Look for a brown door faded to the color of a drunk’s piss. They got ’em from ripe to green, and every which way in between.”

Rourke knocked back the last of his drink and laid another dollar down on the bar. He smiled again, and there was nothing backwoods or bashful about it. It was the smile of a boy who had grown up with a drunk for a father in the Irish Channel, where they had corner saloons that made this one resemble a Sunday school room, and bartenders who kept the peace with brickbats and bolo knives.

“You have yourselves a good night now,” he said. The slack-lipped man didn’t answer or nod, he just turned and walked carefully down to the other end of the bar.

Outside the rain had come and gone, but it hadn’t taken the heat with it. Rourke had already started down the street when he saw a woman leaning against a mist-haloed street lamp. She was naked except for a faded blue wrapper and an old-fashioned corset.

Even with her standing in the shadows he could see that the skin of her legs glowed smooth and coal black, but her face was a pasty pink. Sometimes a country girl, young to the business and before she’d learned what it was a man really wanted, would buy pink chalk, wet it with perfume, and smear it on to make herself look white.

This one had at least got her hustle down. She rolled her belly in a little dance and made a wet, smacking noise with her lips. “Hello, daddy. Wanna do a little business?”

Rourke shook his head, then said, “No, thank you,” to ease the rejection, and then had to laugh at himself for thinking she would care. She was young, but not that young. Yet as he passed her by, he thought that underneath the pink chalk she’d been someone he knew.

He walked down Dumaine, along a brick banquette slick and silver with rain, toward the mouth of the alley where he had parked the Indian. Off in the night someone was playing a trumpet. Whoever it was, all the misery of his life and the sorrow in his soul was coming out of that horn. Daman Rourke stopped to stand beneath a dripping balcony and listen as the trumpet went crying up the last note, making music so sweet it hurt, like the slash of a cane knife to the heart.

It hadn’t all been a lie, what he’d last said to Fio about needing to get laid.

Memory could be like a train whistle in the night, sucking you deep into the low-down blues. You could stop it, sometimes, with booze or drugs, but the best way he’d found was to lose yourself in the arms of a woman, if she was your woman, maybe. If she hadn’t left you yet, or died on you, or just plain given up on you.

No trumpet sobbed out its heart in this uptown neighborhood of double shotgun and camelback houses. Rourke killed the bike’s engine as he rolled it to a stop alongside Bridey O’Mara’s front stoop.

Shadows stirred on a gallery smothered with purple wisteria. A porch swing creaked.

He stopped at the bottom of the steps and looked up at the woman on the swing. His woman, maybe. She sat with her knees drawn up beneath her chin and her arms wrapped around her legs. Her head was tucked low, as if she were trying to hide behind the long fall of her Irish red hair.

“Hey, baby,” he said. “It’s after two in the mornin’. What’re you doing still up?”

She raised her head, and the curtain of her hair parted. Light from the street lamps bled through the thick vines and onto her face. Her cheeks glowed damp with sweat, or maybe tears.

He stayed where he was at the bottom of the steps, staring up at her. She stared back at him a moment, then jerked her head away. “A couple of cops were here looking for you. I had to tell them I hadn’t seen you in over a week.”

Her voice had come out broken and rough. She gripped her legs tighter and rocked a bit. The swing moaned. “I was sitting out here remembering the night Sean didn’t come home. Lordy, how it did storm—do you remember? Thunder and lightning and pouring down like it wasn’t ever going to quit.”

Rourke climbed the steps and sat down next to her on the swing. Her eyes were bright and hot.

“I sat out here on this swing that night, too,” she said, “waiting for him to come home, with the storm going on all around me, and it was like I was falling through a long, black silence. I think that must be what dying’s like, Day, don’t you? Falling through a long, black silence.”

He started to touch her, then didn’t. “I won’t go disappearing on you, Bridey.”

She let go of her legs and leaned against him, her shoulder pressing against his. She wore only a thin cotton wrapper, and he could feel the heat of her body.

Memory could be like a train whistle in the night, and sometimes you felt the pull of its call in spite of all your good intentions and best defenses. He thought of Charles St. Claire lying in puddles of blood, his eyes wide open to death. He was afraid he knew well what horror those eyes had seen in their last moments, because long ago his own eyes had watched Remy Lelourie kill.

This was the place where his thoughts kept getting stuck, like a scratch on a record: If she’d done it once, once, once, she could do it again. Yet he knew already that she had the power to make him believe otherwise. Or not to care.

“I know he’s dead,” said the woman sitting next to him on the swing, and Rourke’s mind made a dizzying jerk as he thought that she, too, was seeing that slashed body in the bloody slave shack. Then he realized her thoughts were back in another rainy night, waiting for a man who never came.

“I know his boat went down in that storm,” she said. “I know that’s what happened, I do. But sometimes ...”

Sometimes.

Rourke turned into her and pulled her close, so he could lay his head between her breasts, and it felt so good. He thought he might have felt her lips in his hair, and then she pulled away from him and stood up. She took him by the hand and led him into her bedroom.

Her eyes were the golden gray color of pewter caught in candlelight. She had dustings of freckles on her breasts that were wet now from his tongue. He lay upon her, and as she looked up at him, her face was full of feelings and memories that he didn’t want to know. He wanted to stay wrapped up in her, lost in her, forever.

It had been them against the world, growing up poor and tough and running wild on Rousseau Street in the Irish Channel. Daman Rourke, Casey Maguire, Sean O’Mara, and Bridey Kinsella. The summer they were twelve, they went to Mamma Rae, the voodooienne, and for a dollar apiece she tattooed blue eight-pointed stars on the inside of their left wrists. She made up a charm and walked backward three times counterclockwise around a virgin’s fresh grave in the light of a waning moon, and then she pronounced them blood brothers for life. It hadn’t mattered that Bridey was a girl; she was one of them. They were all three half in love with her, even then.

Sean had been the one to marry her in the end, though, and he’d kept her until one Sunday two months ago, when he had taken his small trawler out onto Lake Pontchartrain for some spring evening fishing and hadn’t been seen or heard from again. If you didn’t know Sean O’Mara, you would say how he was a cop who’d gone bad, a boozier and a loser who had racked up big debts with his bootlegger and his bookie. You would say there were riverboats and trains leaving New Orleans all the time, and that sometimes the only way out from under was to start over.

Only if you grew up together in the hard-luck, hard-scramble neighborhood of the Irish Channel with him watching your back while you watched his, you would know that Sean O'Mara could run wild at times, but he would never run away.

Or this was what you told yourself on those nights when you lay in Sean O'Mara's spool-turned bed, with Sean O'Mara's wife. When strands of her long hair were caught on your chest, and you could feel the heat of her breath against your face.

"Bridey," he said.

She sighed in answer and pressed her hip into his belly, and his throat closed up on some emotion he couldn't name.

He had sat up with Bridey all that night, and several nights after, while they dragged the lake and the city's underbelly of speakeasies and hot pillow joints, looking for Sean. He hadn't meant to touch her, not even when she'd cried and asked him to hold her, not even when she had covered his mouth with hers in a kiss full of despair. For her, he knew, their touching was only a way of taking comfort from an old friend. For him it was a different sort of comfort—sweetly lonesome, edged with pain, like the wail of a saxophone. His own wife had been dead going on seven years. He had photographs to remind himself of what she'd looked like, but he had long ago forgotten the music her voice could make when she spoke his name.

He touched the woman who was lying beside him now, on the inside of her left wrist, where the small faded blue star was but a shadow, like a birthmark. "Bridey," he said again.

A smile was beginning to grow at the edges of her mouth and eyes when the telephone rang.

He saw her face change, saw the hope flare like a struck match for just an instant in her eyes, and he looked away. She would always, he thought, be out on that swing, waiting.

"It's probably only Mama," she finally said when the bell had jangled a third time. "She has a hard time sleeping nights since Daddy died."

He watched her rise naked from the bed and walk into the parlor, where the telephone rested on a narrow mahogany stand. She answered it with one hand and gathered her hair up off her neck with the other, and the movement arched her back and lifted her breasts. In the light cast by the parlor's red-shaded lamp, her breasts glowed pink, like rare seashells.

He heard her say, "Yes, he's here. Just a moment, please."

He got up, glancing at the camelback clock as he passed by the dresser. It still lacked a couple of hours before dawn.

He went to her, their bodies brushing together, then parting. He took the handset from her and spoke into the receiver. "Yeah?"

Fiorello Prankowski's voice, thick with static, came at him out of the night. "Day? We've got us another one."

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