

Prologue

Date: Wednesday, October 18, 1967
Time: 12:00 a.m.
Location: A Basement in New Orleans

It was the night of a full moon and a total lunar eclipse when a young girl with a weak heart was laid down on the floor amidst a circle of candles in a room of stone.

Barely five years old, she was a small girl with strawberry-blond hair and dark blue eyes, which were barely open due to the drug she had been given hours beforehand. Dressed in a simple white chemise, the girl was laid down by a gentleman with graying hair who wore a black long robe with a pulled-back hood.

All around the room, groups of people dressed in black-hooded robes, holding torches in their gloved hands, looked on. The girl, however, could not have seen the faces of those people even if she were not so heavily drugged, for each face was covered in a porcelain mask, the torchlight and candlelight reflecting eerily off of them.

As the older gentleman, the leader of the gathering, placed the girl down on the floor and started to stand, the girl made a feeble attempt to sit up and reach for him as a child would reach for its parent. The man, whose face looked emotionless in the flickering light, brought a finger to his lips and made a sound: "Shhh."

Reaching beneath his robe, he took out a small porcelain doll dressed in a Southern Belle's ball gown and placed it into the child's arms. She hugged the doll as if it were a life-line. The leader smoothed back her strawberry-blond locks before standing

up and walking just a few paces to an altar draped in red velvet. The girl lay still, her limbs slack from the drugs she'd been given.

As the man reached the altar, he clapped his hands. Two hooded figures emerged from the shadows carrying a brazier that bellowed forth sweet-smelling pink smoke. The brazier was placed in front of the girl, who started to cough as the sweet vapors wafted about her. Upon the altar lay two wooden bowls, one filled with water and one with blood. Next to them was an ornate dagger with a golden hilt topped with a large red stone, and a book no bigger than a hymnal.

Picking up the book, the man leafed through it until he came to a certain page. Turning to face the child in the center of the candles, he began to lead the others in a chant in Creole.

“Papa Gede, nou mande w tanpri voye zye w sou timoun sa a nan tan fê nwa sa a. Tande vwa nou ak chante nou yo, pou gras ou kapab geri li.”

On cue, the hooded figures around the room began to chant, *“Papa Gede, nou konjire ou!”* Each figure's foot rose and fell in time to the chant, keeping a measured beat to the words.

Putting the book aside and taking the dagger, the leader knelt down before the girl and cut off a lock of her hair. She rolled her head back to look at the man, a confused and anxious look on her small face, her mouth slightly open. She tried to sit up, but her movements were feeble and ineffective.

Standing, the leader returned to the altar, sprinkling the girl's hair into the bowl of water and the bowl of blood. As he did this, he continued to chant, his own voice ringing out over the chanting of the crowd. *“Larèn Brijit, nou mande w tanpri pwoteje saktite timoun sa a nan tan fê nwa sa a. Tande priyè nou k ap monte wo nan chason, pou kè li ka vin fôtifye.”*

The chanting of the figures grew in volume, as did the strength of their stomping feet keeping time, the words changing to, *“Larèn Brijit, nou konjire ou!”* Some of the figures began gyrating their hips and torsos around lewdly, a few of them ceasing the chant to make guttural noises that bordered on obscene.

Taking the book in one hand and the bowl of water in another, the leader walked over to the girl, who was now looking around the room, clutching the doll, and starting to sob fearfully.

Pouring the water on top of the small child's head, causing her to cry out in a pitifully weak voice, he continued to chant. "*Bawon Samdi, Wa Lanmò, n ap mande pou pa foye kavo timoun sa a aswè a. Tande vre entansyon nou, pou li kapab viv san lapèrèz?*"

The figures continued to chant, some of them slithering around from where they stood, or crawling upon the ground like beasts, their voices saying, "*Bawon Samdi, nou konjire ou!*" The circle around the girl began to tighten, the figures drawing nearer to the trembling child.

Exchanging the bowl of water with the bowl of blood, the leader returned to stand above the girl, who was now crying in a terrified and choking voice. As he poured the blood around the child's head, making her huddle into a ball and cry out, "*Papa,*" he continued to chant. "*Sen Madonna, nou konjire Twa Gwo Lwa w yo. Nou mande ou pou yo bay pouwva yo pou timoun sa a, pou maladi li an pa fini avèk li.*"

The child continued to cry in terror, even as the hooded figures' voices rose to a fevered pitch, chanting, "*Sen Madonna, nou konjire ou!*" The figures crawling or slithering on the ground moved around the circle of candles that separated themselves from the trembling girl, some of them only pausing to make those guttural noises at her, making her flinch.

The leader raised his hands, looked toward the ceiling, and cried out, "*Kite yo tande vwa nou yo! Kite yo tande chanson nou an!*"

From the darkest corners of the room came the sounds of drums and tambourines. The figures who hadn't been crawling or slithering on the ground began a dance, moving lewdly and crying out, voices ranging from the high-pitched to the deep and grating. The torchlight, shining off the porcelain masks, gave them a haunting, if not outright demonic appearance.

Throughout all this, as the girl cried in absolute terror, crying out "*Papa*" over and over, the leader stood above her, arms raised to the heavens, his face contorted with euphoria. Over and over he screamed out, "*Tande chanson nou an!*"

As the dancing and music reached a crescendo, the small girl suddenly let out a horrific scream that tore through the room like

a shot. Her tiny hands and feet began to punch and kick as if she were having a fit.

One small fist connected with the face of a figure slithering by her head, and with a resounding crack, the mask broke into the face of the dark-skinned man behind it, causing him to scream as he rolled back.

A small foot connected with the chin of a figure crawling by her legs, and with a snap, the person's head flew back with the impact, the mask flying off to reveal a Caucasian woman's face pale with shock. She slumped to the ground. The girl's strength suddenly seemed inhuman.

With another shriek, the girl knocked over the brazier, scattering sweet-smelling incense and red-hot embers all over the floor. The nearby figures jumped back to avoid catching their robes aflame.

The music stopped and a few surprised cries tore through the quickly sobering crowd of hooded figures, but no screams were as loud as those coming from the girl on the floor in the center of the circle of candles. Twisting around, she began to froth at the mouth, her eyes rolling into the back of her head.

As the tenor of the room changed from euphoric to concerned, the girl threw the doll with preternatural fury. It flipped through the air and hit a hooded figure in the chest harder than a five-year-old should have been able to throw anything. With a muffled cry, the figure sank to the ground.

"Princess!" The leader rushed to the girl's side and knelt beside her, trying to get his hands on her. Covered in blood, water, and sweat, greatly foaming at the mouth, she thrashed about violently.

"She's having a fit," the man called out. He motioned toward one of the hooded figures off to the side—it was a tall, slender person. "Get my bag, quickly!" He then pointed to three other strong-looking figures. "I need you to restrain her while I give her an injection!"

The three figures moved forward, albeit with obvious hesitation, and soon they were upon the small child. Two men grabbed

her arms. The leader motioned to the third man, saying, "Hold down her legs!"

The figure seemed even more hesitant than the others, but he finally reached for her legs. The girl gave a sudden shriek and a jerk and drove both feet into the hooded figure's face. The mask shattered into hundreds of pieces, slicing the man's face open, and the force of the kick threw him back. As two figures tended to the fallen man, two more quickly came and held down the girl's legs.

Still managing to thrash about, the girl arched her back and thrust her pelvis into the air, crying out in gibberish as she began to choke. "Sir," said one of the men holding the girl down, "what's happening to her?"

"She's seizing," replied the leader, who had by now been given a black bag by the tall and slender figure. Taking out a vial and syringe, he quickly measured out a dose. "I believe it's from the stress of the ritual. I'm giving her a dose of Valium before she hurts herself."

Without another word, the leader plunged the needle into the child's arm. Slowly, the screaming and convulsing started to lessen. All the while, the men held the girl down, even though that appeared to be challenging.

Once her convulsions lessened to where she could be safely touched, the leader wiped the foam off her mouth and again smoothed back her hair. The girl looked up at him with an unreadable expression. This made the leader's brow furrow with both confusion and concern.

"What is it?" asked the same hooded man as before.

"I'm not sure," replied the leader. "I think she's fully aware. But she can't be. She should be asleep."

Reaching his hand out, the leader called for a candle. As soon as someone handed him one of the candles from the circle, he held it over the girl's face, close to her eyes.

The girl didn't flinch; she didn't even blink. She just stared at him. With concern in his voice, the man said, "Princess?"

The girl smiled and said, "*Li la a.*" With a small puff, the girl blew out the candle, leaving the leader with a puzzled look on

his face. He leaned back and looked at the girl as her eyes slowly closed and she fell asleep.

“This was a mistake, Brother,” said the slender figure next to him. She removed her mask, revealing an aged face with a pinched, tight-lipped, sour look. “Now you’ve gone and caused your precious heir permanent damage. She’ll grow up broken now. Mark my words, Brother.”

“Silence, Sister,” muttered the leader, reaching down to take the child into his arms.

One of the men who had helped hold the girl’s arms down said, “She’s right. There’s no way a person can recover from that. She’s lucky if doesn’t end up in a sanita—”

The man stopped as the leader turned and gave him a look that could only mean one thing—death. The figure retreated.

All around, the other hooded figures were removing their hoods and masks, revealing men and women of all ages and races. Many of them started to help the few who had been wounded.

Someone called out, “We’re going to need an ambulance. Gerald Robichaux’s face is cut to ribbons.”

The leader walked through the parting crowd, not looking anyone in the eyes, to a large wooden doorway. Someone opened the door, and the leader walked up the staircase beyond it. The slender woman, still in her hooded robe, followed the man upstairs.

“Where do you think you are going, Brother?” asked the woman, her arms folded indignantly.

“To a hospital, Sister,” replied the man in an annoyed tone, stopping in a well-appointed and brightly lit study. “The princess has had a seizure and needs to be looked over.”

“You need to address what happened,” said the woman as she pointed down the stairs, her tight lips twisting with growing anger. “You need to assure them that this will never happen again. Tonight was a total failure.”

“Correction: tonight was an unexpected success,” replied the man, his nose in the air. “I will have to take a day or two to ana-

lyze the data, and I may have to reference some things with Dr. Lazarus, but I believe we've witnessed a miracle tonight."

The woman looked as if she could spit, her lips snarling in obvious frustration. "A miracle, Brother? Really now? The child had a psychotic fit. Russell is right, the girl is fortunate if she doesn't end up chained to a bed for the rest of her li—"

"Do not say that again, Sister," the man snarled at the woman, making her gasp with shock and outrage. "Insult my princess again and I'll forget that you're family."

The woman seemed to lessen her anger at the man's outburst. Finally, she contented herself with just looking away in a huff.

The man turned to continue on his way out of the study, saying, "Anyway, next full moon, we'll be better prepared. We know what to expect this time."

"We are doing this again?" asked the woman, the surprise evident in her voice. "They will never go for it. The Priory isn't like that, Brother."

The leader chortled as he stopped at the door and turned toward the woman. "Ha! Those fools would jump off the Huey Long Bridge if I asked them. Face it, Sister, the Priory only lives because of our bloodline. Next full moon, we will try this again. This time, we should use one of the twins. Their mother is one of our priestesses. And they should take to the *theens* nicely, don't you think? I'm anxious to see how they react to the ritual." The foreign word had an African-style *click* at the beginning.

As the man started to step out of the study, the woman called out, "Brother!"

The man stopped but didn't look back. "Yes? What is it?"

"There is no such thing as magic or miracles," she said with a scowl. "You and I both know these rituals are merely superstition to keep the others in line. So stop acting like they could really correct the girl's condition. It's madness."

The man turned to the woman and grinned widely. "The mind can do things so incredible it may very well be magic. Therefore, there is a fine line between magic and madness, Sister. You would do well to remember that."

And with that, the man left, the child in his arms, leaving the woman to stand there with a sour look on her face.

She only made one last comment before heading back downstairs: “No good can come from any of this.”

Chapter 1:

Twenty Years Later

Date: Wednesday, August 5, 1992

Time: 3:00 a.m.

Location: Corner of Dauphine & Ursuline, French Quarter

A steady rain was falling on the streets of the New Orleans French Quarter. It was a reprieve after an ill-tempered summer shower. The torrential downpour had ceased not too long ago, leaving a low-hanging mist over the cobbled streets. The droplets of water were all but invisible as they fell from the night sky, only becoming perceptible as they passed a streetlight or collected on the shingles of a nearby roof before cascading into one of many gutters.

The sound of the rainwater rushing down those gutters to the streets below, where they collected in fetid puddles, had a sloppy quality to it, an unclean sound. Mixing together the sights and sounds was the smell. Despite the recent summer showers, the stench of the French Quarter still lingered, the collective booze and bile of the New Orleans tourist hanging like a heavy blanket.

Detective Rodger Bergeron noted, as he stood deep in thought on the corner of Dauphine and Ursuline, that he loved that smell.

The smell was a way for Rodger to know that he was home. Born and raised with all the pride of a pure-blooded Cajun, Detective Bergeron loved his hometown. He loved every single flaw New Orleans had to offer. He loved the constant humidity that made everyone sweat even on winter days. He loved the run-

down and dilapidated buildings that simultaneously preserved their French and Spanish heritage. He even loved the myriad forms of human decadence that flourished in the heights and back alleys of the French Quarter and the Lower Ninth Ward.

It was New Orleans. It was the Big Easy. It was hell. It was Rodger's home.

As Rodger stood on the street corner, coming out of his musings, he noticed that he was being watched. Looking across the street, he spotted three tourists looking in his direction from the second-story balcony of one of Dauphine Street's hotels. The men, two of them, were typical middle-aged tourists, wearing cargo pants and sandals, heads crowned with ten-dollar crew cuts, and a little too much chest hair.

The woman had two dozen or so lengths of plastic beads draped around her neck as if they were treasured pearls and gemstones. She wore a pair of blue jeans that looked like they took a machine to get into, and a revealing white shirt with the words 'I'll Tickle Your Pickle for a Nickel' written on it in bright pink letters. All three held large plastic cups.

Fortunately, the trio, who by now had noticed Rodger and were waving at him, were the only ones out tonight. Most of the French Quarter was either asleep or drunk, and the drunk people were mostly contained to Bourbon Street at this hour. As he gave the three tourists a nod of his head, Rodger felt relieved that no one else was around. Even the local news had yet to arrive, and with some luck, they could clean up and clear out before they did arrive.

Now facing down Ursuline Street, Rodger observed the flashing red-and-blue lights of the half-dozen or so police cars parked around the entrance to the crime scene—an inset door leading down into a basement. Next to the curb was a Mobile Crime Lab, its occupants absent. They were already in the basement.

Just another night in New Orleans.

"It's horrible," said a fresh voice beside Detective Bergeron. Rodger didn't look at his partner, Junior Detective Michael

LeBlanc, but instead watched as a number of uniformed officers and CSI personnel scurried in and out of the crime scene's doorway. He absently raised a Styrofoam cup filled with piping hot coffee to his lips and sipped with expert dexterity, not even slightly burning himself. The coffee was strong, and Rodger could taste the chicory, a strong, acrid taste that lingered. Lost in his thoughts, Rodger heard the voice of his partner again.

"It's horrible," Michael said again, as if trying to get Rodger's attention. "CSI is just finishing up, and the coroner is on his way. What do you think?"

Rodger turned and looked at his partner, who was his opposite in every way. Michael stood there wearing a gray Stanford suit, complete with a white shirt and navy blue tie, right hand thrust into his side pocket as if he was feeling himself, left hand holding his own Styrofoam cup.

From his freshly trimmed sideburns and bangs to his recently polished dress shoes, Michael looked as far removed from his partner, who was wearing a pair of old, worn shoes and tan duster thrown over whatever he'd worn yesterday, as a Persian cat from a common tabby. Despite their night and day differences, the duo had already closed over fifty murder investigations this year—and it was only August.

Rodger was silent for a moment as he examined his partner's face, which showed almost no emotion. Michael's brown eyes just barely moved, as if reading the pages off a typewriter.

Rodger had come to respect Michael's mental acumen. His partner had graduated top of his class with the highest honors. He rarely spoke needlessly or frivolously. His social skills sucked, and he had no concept of how the real world worked, but he was introspective and highly intelligent.

"What do I think?" Rodger paused and mulled over what he might say, only too certain he knew what to make of the scene. When Police Dispatch had placed the call for the two detectives, the words *gruesomely dismembered* had been used. Then, one glance inside the basement where the murder had taken place, and Rodger had had enough.

“Well, Michael,” Rodger finally said, his voice gruff from years of smoking, his eyes heavy with years of seeing one horror after another. “What do you think?”

Michael exhaled and looked up at the rain, letting it hit his face for a moment, before looking back at his partner and beginning, “Victim is a Caucasian female, age twenty to thirty, with severe lacerations to the abdomen, chest, and throat by a sharp, but small, instrument. Most likely a scalpel. Arms and legs were bound with electrical wire, either to a metallic chair or table, and the victim was dismembered with some sort of hacksaw or buzzsaw. Eyes, teeth, and fingertips were removed after death.”

Rodger nodded at Michael’s analysis, impressed as always with his partner’s ability to recall a scene simply by looking at it once.

Michael paused for a moment before adding, “So yeah . . . I think it’s horrible.”

Rodger let out a snort. Then he was ashamed at himself for laughing even a little.

Finishing his coffee, Michael asked, “So why did you take one look and leave? It’s not like you to just walk away from a crime scene, but”—Michael paused and a thoughtful look crossed his face—“it’s like you’ve seen this before.”

Rodger looked over at Michael and frowned sorrowfully as he gulped the final draught of his coffee. Placing the cup on the curb for the street cleaners to take away, Rodger looked back over the entrance to the crime scene and sighed heavily. It was twenty years ago this very night that he had stood outside this very same doorway.

“I have, Michael.” Rodger didn’t look at his partner as he walked to the doorway, past the groups of officers and members of Crime Lab scuttling outside with uniform pale and sickly looks.

Tracing his fingers over the doorway’s frame, Rodger spoke as if addressing a distant memory. “The worst case I’ve ever worked. Solved some twenty years ago. The Bourbon Street Ripper murders.”

At that moment, another police officer, a short woman who walked this area as her beat, came out of the doorway. Officer Guidry exhaled and inhaled loudly, as if she had been holding her breath, before looking up at both detectives, shaking her head, and speaking in a thick Creole accent. "It's a downright nightmare in there, Detectives. Crime Lab is almost through, and the coroner should be here any minute. Sergeant's taken my statement and sent me back on my beat."

That said, Officer Guidry hurried off down the street, as if she couldn't get away from the crime scene fast enough.

Rodger watched her leave.

Michael shook his head and said, "It's a real shame that she's the one who found the body. She's about the same age as the victim. Damn. What a way to start your career on the force."

Despite his grizzled demeanor, Rodger had to agree with Michael's statement. Officer Guidry had been on the force for only six months. She was the one to discover the body. She was the one to call in the murder. It was a hellish awakening to the horrors a police officer can face at any given time. Rodger shook his head as he walked away from the doorway. "It's a crying shame. But what's worse is that it looks like we have a copycat of the Bourbon Street Ripper murders."

Confusion showed plainly on Michael's face as he followed his partner. "Hold on, Rodger. You were the one who solved the Bourbon Street Ripper murders. So why do you think tonight's murder is a copycat?"

Rodger stopped several yards from the crime scene's doorway and leaned against the wall of the building. Protected from the stray raindrops, Rodger took out a cigarette, lit it, and moistened it between his lips. As he took a lingering drag and exhaled just as slowly, he looked to his partner, who was watching him with anxious anticipation, and began to speak.

"It was during the early seventies when those murders began. Back then I was a moderately successful detective with an unimpressive list of closed cases. By a stroke of fate or a case of

rotten luck, however you want to look at it, my partner, Edward, and I were assigned the case. The first time I saw one of those murder scenes, what he did to one of those women, I was sickened to my soul.”

The gravelly croak of Rodger’s voice as he sank into his narrative was ripe with sordid memories.

“The pools of blood. The strips of flesh. The stench of bile. The gruesomeness alone had been enough to turn my stomach inside out. But what affected me to the core was the look on the victim’s face. It was as if someone had frozen a scream of incalculable agony on her once pretty face. Just one look, and in an instant I felt as if I had experienced every horror that woman was forced to endure before being allowed to die.”

“I remember hearing about the Bourbon Street Ripper at a lecture on serial killers. The media named him that because the murders were similar to the old Jack the Ripper murders in the late eighteen hundreds,” said Michael. “Awful. That a person can do that to another human being. It’s disgusting.”

Taking another lingering drag off his cigarette, Rodger continued without paying any heed to his partner’s interruption.

“Correct. At that time, Moon Landrieu was in the mayor’s office, and already his battle with City Council over desegregation had the police budget in shambles. My partner and I were the only ones sent after this sicko, and every time that it seemed we were closing in on him, he evaded us with ease. After a while, it was like he was mocking us.”

Rodger looked up at a nearby streetlight, watching the raindrops fall silently past the yellow halogen corona. His normally furrowed brow was even heavier this evening, all that stress from twenty years ago crashing back with every second.

“But obviously you caught the Ripper, correct?” asked Michael, raising his eyebrows inquisitively.

Rodger nodded in response before taking a third drag of his cigarette. Unlike some people who took lingering drags from a cigarette before accenting a point, Rodger managed to make it

look natural. Like Sam Spade or Lieutenant Columbo, being a grizzled and jaded detective looked good on Rodger.

“Yeah, we finally were able to piece together our killer,” Rodger said as he scratched his shoulder blades against the brick wall behind him. “Dr. Vincent Castille, a surgeon at Southern Baptist Hospital in Uptown. Old aristocratic money. Real old. Not that he needed it. The guy was a real genius with the scalpel. It was said he could fix any injury and heal any illness. And he wasn’t cheap. Rich folks would come from all over Louisiana just to place themselves under his care.”

“A real saint,” quipped Michael.

“And a first-rate psychopath. His personal life came out during the trial. Apparently, this monster had been collecting memorabilia from the Middle Ages or the Inquisition or some shit. Real torture equipment, like the kind you’d see down in the Wax Museum. I don’t even know what some of that stuff was, or how it was used, but it looked downright evil. The doc, however, loved that stuff.”

Michael grimaced and then asked, “So the Bourbon Street Ripper—I mean Dr. Castille—tortured his victims to death because he was reenacting scenes from his private collection?”

“That’s what the newspapers wanted to believe,” replied Rodger with disgust, taking a fourth drag of his cigarette, wearing the stick almost to the nub. He exhaled slowly and the smoke billowed out. “The murders were methodical and well planned, much like a surgery. The wounds were cut cleanly. There was no passion in the crimes, no rage.”

He made a scribbling motion in the air with his stunted cigarette and said, “And he took notes. Lots of notes.”

A coarse voice coughed out a pointed “ahem” beside them. Both detectives turned to see an older gentleman with tired eyes and scraggly gray hair. His black suit and white shirt were crumpled, as if it needed a trip to the dry cleaners as much as its owner needed a trip to the day spa. The man himself looked grim and serious.

“Morton,” said Rodger with a nod of the head to the New Orleans coroner.

“Dr. Melancon,” said Michael. He held out his hand, which the coroner ignored.

“Rodger. Michael,” replied Morton with the look of a man who would rather not be outside in the rain. “I’m sure you know what this looks like, right?”

“The Bourbon Street Ripper murders. It’s obviously a copycat.” Rodger looked over Morton’s shoulder toward the doorway leading to the crime scene. A pair of EMTs were rolling out a covered gurney, a third one behind them holding a black garbage bag that looked mostly full.

“It’s goddamn butchery! That’s what it is,” exclaimed the coroner quite suddenly, his charcoal eyes burning with indignation. “Whoever did this knew exactly how the Ripper did it, down to the amputations and living autopsy at the end. It’s sheer barbarism!”

Rodger didn’t let Morton’s outrage affect him. He knew that Morton had a personal reason for feeling so passionate about these murders. And one glance over at Michael, who had flinched at the outburst, confirmed to Rodger that his partner had no idea.

“All the same,” inquired Rodger calmly, “your assessment is that it’s a copycat, correct?”

Morton thrust his wrinkled hands into his coat pockets and spat on the sidewalk. “If you’re asking me if the victim died of exsanguination, then yes. If you’re asking if there was severe physical trauma, then yes.” Morton’s voice had once again considerably raised, so much that the trio of tourists, who were still on the balcony, perked up their heads with interest.

“If you’re asking me if she suffered, then hell, bloody yes.” Morton was practically in a fit now, to the point where Rodger was holding out his hands to try and calm him. To the senior detective’s dismay, the coroner just railed on, “But if you want the really gory details, Rodger, you’re going to have to wait until I have the autopsy report ready. But don’t worry, if this is anything like the

Bourbon Street Ripper murders, we'll get plenty more where that came from! Until then, I suggest you go say some prayers at Saint Louis Cathedral, because Satan is back in the Big Easy!"

With that, Morton stormed off, drawing looks from the remaining officers and officials at the scene, some of whom shook their heads at the over-the-top outburst from the coroner.

Michael, who by this point wore an exasperated look, turned to his partner, and mouthed the words, "What the hell?"

"Don't worry about it," Rodger said as he took a final drag from his cigarette and tossed it into a nearby puddle. "He has his reasons for being so sensitive about this shit. More so than most of us."

With that bit of wisdom dispensed, Rodger grew silent, his mind working. He mulled over a way to start the investigation off. He was sure it was a copycat, even though he knew that they needed more than one victim before City Hall would consider it a real copycat murderer.

Goddamn bureaucracy.

Rodger frowned. There was one way to get a jump on this investigation if it was indeed a copycat. It would require bothering someone he didn't want to bother, but given the grotesque nature of the crime, he felt there was no other choice.

Rodger began moving to his squad car. "Come on, let's get going."

Rodger heard a quick "Hmm?" from his partner before hearing those polished shoes scuffling after him.

Like a duckling hurrying to catch up to its mother, Michael scuttled over the sidewalk to the passenger side of the car. "Where are we going?"

"To see someone who can help us get a leg up on this damn thing," responded Rodger as he slid into the driver's seat and strapped himself in tightly. The receptacle for the safety belt failed to catch a few times before finally clicking in place. Rodger paid it no mind. The department couldn't afford to give him a raise after five years, so why have them spring for new seat belt latches?

Damnably budget cuts!

“All right, I’ll bite,” replied Michael as he effortlessly latched his safety belt in place. “Who is this person? How can they help us?”

Rodger turned the key in the ignition, and with a roar the Ford Crown Victoria came to life, headlights spilling out over the back of Ursuline Street. Putting the vehicle in gear, he replied, “Sam Castille, Vincent’s only living descendant. Sam has some stuff of the doc’s that police never got warrants for during the trial. Some bullshit red tape thrown up by the defense that ultimately did that scumbag no good. If we can get our hands on that stuff, it may help us understand how Vincent thought out his crimes.”

With a nod, Michael leaned back in his seat, folding his arms thoughtfully. “I see. So we establish a pattern of behavior and use that to predict the copycat’s next move.”

“Exactly,” replied Rodger with a small smile.

Michael’s expression was still thoughtful as he asked, “And you think this Sam fellow will help us out?”

“I hope so,” replied Rodger as he pulled off Ursuline and onto Dauphine Street, passing underneath the balcony where the tourists still watched the gruesome gallery below. “Sam and I . . . we go way back. Shouldn’t be a problem.”

In truth, however, the uncertainty was still there, along with a pang in his chest. Sam was a delicate matter to Rodger, but Sam was also the only one who could give Rodger what he needed. It was a real conundrum.

“Great,” answered Michael as he relaxed and looked out the window. “So where does Sam live?”

“Uptown,” replied Rodger as he stopped at a stop sign, checking both ways before proceeding forward through the intersection. “Near Tulane University.”

The rain had started up again, coming down in sheets of water that made visibility nearly zero.

“Nice area.” Michael looked out the window, before looking over at the clock, blinking a bit, and calling Rodger’s attention

to the time. “Will he even be awake at this hour? It’s only three thirty.”

Rodger chuckled to himself. If he remembered properly, Sam was an incurable night owl. As he turned out to the highway, leaving the French Quarter and its grisly murder behind, Rodger said, “Oh yeah. By the time we get there, Sam will definitely be awake.”

By now, the summer storm was raging on in full force.

Chapter 2:

Sam of Spades

Date: Wednesday, August 5, 1992

Time: 4:00 a.m.

Location: Sam Castille's Townhome, Uptown New Orleans

With a shuddering series of clanks, the door to the medicine cabinet more or less slid open, revealing row after row of bottles, each bottle filled with pills. Triazolam, Temazepam, Zolpidem, and other sleep aids shared the shelves with NoDoz, Vivarin, and other pills meant to do the exact opposite.

Only on the bottom shelf were pills dedicated to functions other than promoting or inhibiting sleep. One such bottle, a bottle of plain aspirin so old the label was half-worn, was the target of Sam Castille's search.

Sam spent a moment or two half-opening and closing the cabinet door, listening to the mirror as it shuddered in its track, before finally sliding it all the way open. To Sam, the sound was reminiscent of heavy rain on a tin roof, and that was very relaxing. Finally, with the cabinet completely open, she found and snatched up the bottle of aspirin. Then she closed the door to the cabinet, coming face-to-face with her own reflection.

Sam wasn't pretty by conventional standards. Her face was more gaunt than normal, her cheekbones were too high, and her nose was a little too big. Her blue-gray eyes didn't shine, and her sandy blond hair wasn't remarkable, especially pulled back in a tight ponytail as it was. Her frame was slender, with only her hips having any definition.

Many people had told Samantha Castille that she had that “hometown girl” look. She couldn’t care less. People weren’t something Sam was interested in.

After staring at her reflection for a few moments, Sam flipped open the bottle of aspirin with her thumb and popped a few pills right into her mouth. She stared again at her reflection before leaning forward to check under her eyes to see if the bags were as heavy as they had been the night before. They were. By the time the bitter taste of the pills dissolving in her mouth registered, Sam was already washing it down with a mouthful of cold coffee.

The vile combination of tastes made Sam’s face crunch up into a comical pucker. The surge of bitterness passed within a few moments, and she swallowed the wretched mouthful and shuddered in disgust.

Leaving the opened pill bottle on the sink, she took her coffee mug, which was marked with the phrase, “If I gave a penny for your thoughts, I’d have change coming,” and headed downstairs to her study.

Outside, the patter of raindrops softly rolled off the slated roof and down to the gutter below, sloshing out to the sidewalk of Uptown New Orleans.

It had been storming earlier, and Sam, after trying with all her might, had abandoned all pretense of trying to work and had contented herself with sitting outside on her back porch, holding a mug of cooling black coffee, listening to the torrents of rain, and thinking of as little as was humanly possible. Only when the rain had finally dwindled to a mere patter had Sam realized she had a splitting headache, and that she had daydreamed away two hours.

“Isn’t that just lovely,” Sam had said to herself before unfolding her legs, sliding her feet into her slippers, and walking back inside the house in search of some aspirin.

But now with the rain having lessened up, Sam returned to her study and the large solid oak desk that acted as a centerpiece to the room, taking a seat in a large red velvet chair. The desk, the chair, the house she lived in, and most of her belongings were keepsakes from her father.

Even the lonesome and frightfully old-looking typewriter resting on the desk was once used by her father. Sam's fingers lingered on the sides of the typewriter, lost in nostalgia for a moment's passing, before she ritualistically slid her fingers over the keys of the typewriter and began to type.

Mortimer crept down the abandoned hallway, the creaking of the floorboards piercing the night's silence like a terrified caterwaul. The investigator's right hand stayed firmly wrapped around the butt of his trusty revolver, his left hand wrapped protectively around the flashlight that illuminated the path before him. Beads of sweat gathered on his brow as his eyes darted side to side, suspicious of every shadow. Soon Mortimer came upon the last door in the hallway. He took a deep breath. The answers to the Mystery of the Crimson Mask lay inside! Hands shaking, the investigator reluctantly forsook his gun and, with an audible gulp, opened the door, revealing . . .

Sam stopped typing in midsentence, her lips scrunching up into a pucker and shifting to the side. "Right," she said and moved from the typewriter to a pile of handwritten notes. There were scribbles, mind-maps, jots, and musings—all the notes of a mystery writer—and Sam shuffled through them several times before finally letting out a deep sigh. Her fingers slid from the loose-leaf papers and ceremoniously slid back to the typewriter. For a long moment, she just sat there, fingers on the keys, not typing anything.

After a few soft breaths, Sam's face crinkled in frustration and anger, and she quickly typed out:

. . . nothing at all. Why? Because Sam is a dumb bitch who wrote herself into a corner six pages ago and has no feasible way for the Crimson Mask to be in this room. It's in the bottom of the river with Mr. Dahl, the crooked attorney who stole it at the beginning, after being murdered by Rico-the-Freaking-Gay-Mobster.

Mortimer Branston fails at being a private investigator, leaves New Orleans, and moves in with Vinnie the Nose, Stinky Earl the Plumber, Jimmy with the Gimp Leg, and every other character Sam has introduced but failed to tie in to the crime to provide cushioning in case she writes herself into a corner yet again!

Sam stopped the torrent of self-hate as she heard the clack of the typewriter's hammers hitting the carriage of the typewriter, the paper having run out. Leaning back and covering her face with her hands, Sam let out a long sigh before finally rubbing her brow.

"This sucks," Sam announced to herself. "What the hell is wrong with me? You think it would be easy to write a crappy mystery." Sighing with exasperation, Sam got up and, taking the litany of self-flagellation off the typewriter, walked away. A few moments later, the crumpled and balled-up paper landed in the wastebasket by the desk.

Sam was a mystery writer of mild repute, known locally amongst the natives of New Orleans by her pen name "Sam of Spades." Since she was old enough to work a typewriter, Sam had written mysteries, drawing upon her love of crime dramas and gritty detective novels to create worlds where smoke-filled interrogation rooms and back-alley information brokering were as commonplace as taxis and streetcars. While Sam of Spades had enjoyed a modest success within the metropolitan areas of New Orleans, she had never experienced true success.

One part of it was that Sam just had difficulty concentrating for long periods of time. Even when she didn't have coffee in her system, which was relatively rare, she would struggle to maintain focus for more than a few minutes. About the only thing that helped was alcohol. Consequently, Sam drank a lot of wine.

Another part of this had to do with Sam's sleep disorder. Ever since her father's death, when she was only ten years old, Sam had never been able to sleep soundly without medication.

Doctors and friends had offered Sam prescription sleep aids, over-the-counter drugs, and questionable home remedies to help her get a good night's sleep—with none of it working. After a while, any doctor who treated her for her sleep disorders would give up and refer her back to the psychologist who had been treating her since she was a child—Dr. Klein.

For Sam, going to therapy didn't help her problems sleeping, but it did offer her a weekly chance to express her frustrations to someone who'd listen, even if he was paid to do just that. As for tackling her sleep disorder, Sam continued to pop pills and drive herself to exhaustion, finally getting a solid six to eight hours of sleep about every three days.

Dr. Klein, whose goatee, monocle, and German accent made him look like the cliché of a Freudian psychologist, strongly disagreed with Sam's methods of getting sleep. He'd often state it would eventually deteriorate her "mental condition to the point of irrecoverable psychosis"—this statement usually said while the doctor puffed out his chest and pointed toward the ceiling knowledgeably.

Sam, of course, was basing a recurring villain in her stories off of him.

The final reason Sam of Spades enjoyed only a small regional popularity was that she was notoriously late on her deadlines. With the habit of being days to weeks late with submissions, no publishing company would dare touch her. Sam was fortunate that Jacob Hueber, one of the publishers for the *Times-Picayune*, the local paper for New Orleans, was a close friend of hers from college.

Sam didn't have many friends. People made her very uncomfortable, which was why Jacob getting her a job at the newspaper was such a big deal. She could work from home and only had to go out to mail her publications to the newspaper—whenever she could actually get them written. Many times, Jacob would almost have to knock down Sam's door to get a submission on time, and the last-minute rush resulted in a noticeable lack of quality.

It wasn't that Sam was lazy or didn't like to write, nor was she without talent, but she was so often afflicted with writer's

block that she'd go days, sometimes weeks, without knowing what to write next. That, combined with her terrible sleep schedule, held back what would otherwise be a very successful career. Her only solace was in drinking a local blend of coffee and chicory, or listening to the raindrops whenever a shower would spring up overhead.

Sam was just preparing to indulge in one of those pleasures, putting on a fresh pot of her favorite coffee, when the doorbell rang. For a moment, she just looked in the direction of the front door, startled by someone visiting this early in the morning. While it was no secret amongst those who knew Sam that she was a guiltless night owl, there weren't that many who knew her to begin with. She chose this life of seclusion and enjoyed it, and she wasn't so sure about an interruption at four fifteen in the morning.

Leaving the coffee to brew, Sam moved toward the front of the house, stopping for a moment in the hallway to look inside a ticking grandfather clock. There, on a wooden shelf just below where the pendulum hung, was a gun—a service revolver left to Sam by her father.

Whenever she answered the door, Sam always checked to make sure the weapon was present. She had never been the victim of a violent crime, and she did not want to take that chance. When she was sure the gun was in place, she headed to the front foyer.

“One moment,” Sam called out to the person on the other side, fumbling with the old metal latch to the door. She'd see who it was and politely send them on their way. Even if she wasn't facing another bout of writer's block, she was in no mood to receive visitors. She never was.

The latch finally undone, Sam opened the door and started with, “Sorry, but do you realize it's four—”

Samantha stopped midsentence when she saw who was standing there. Glowering through the crack in the door, dripping with cold rainwater, was someone she hadn't seen in years.

“Detective Bergeron,” Sam said with a start, staring at the older man. “What a pleasant surprise. Why are you here?”

Rodger nodded at Sam through the doorway. “Sam, yes, it's me. I need to speak with you. It will only take a moment.”

Sam could make out another person with Rodger, someone dressed “to the nines.” She figured that was most likely Rodger’s newest partner.

Had anyone else been there, Sam would have turned them away without a second thought. Her head aching again, she wondered why the detective who had put her grandfather away was here at four in the morning. Perhaps it was for a personal reason. He had once been an important part of her life, but he hadn’t even so much as sent a birthday card in years. The thought made her tense with years of resentment.

No, thought Sam, *I need to give him a chance.*

Sam suddenly realized that she was just standing there, keeping the door cracked open while staring at Rodger and the other man. Sam would often do that—stare at someone absently while lost in her own thoughts.

“Sorry. One moment,” she said.

Soon Sam was unlatching the door and letting the two detectives inside. By the time Rodger’s partner entered, Sam was leaning against the wall of the entry hall, considering the men curiously.

“So nice of you to come calling on this rainy day, Detective,” she said.

“Please, Sam, call me Rodger,” the older man said. “This is my partner, Detective Michael LeBlanc.”

Sam shook Michael’s hand while sizing him up. His clean-cut look was offset only by the tense clench of his jaw. Sam immediately decided that this was one of those intellectual types, the kind that probably lived in their heads and had a rather noticeable lack of social graces.

“A pleasure, Ms. Castille,” replied Michael, being very obvious about looking her over. “I’m sorry, I expected—”

“That I was a guy,” interrupted Sam with a shrug, suspecting that Rodger had been ambiguous about her gender—a suspicion confirmed by a smirk from the senior detective. “It’s all right. I go by Sam, so a lot of people get confused.”

To Rodger, Sam then said, “So then, what brings you by so early?”

“Believe me, Sam,” Rodger said, looking at his hostess’s feet, “if this could have waited until the morning, I wouldn’t be disturbing you.”

For a moment, Sam’s lips tightened as she looked Rodger directly in the face. It seemed he was avoiding eye contact with her. Sam had often wondered if Rodger had just stopped caring about her after he found out that her grandfather was a serial killer. His actions now made her believe that even more.

With a soft sigh, Sam decided she was too tired to care and motioned toward the study. “Come on in. Hang your raincoats and hats up on the rack, wipe your feet, and have a seat.” She started heading back toward the kitchen. “I’m about to make some coffee. Do you want any?”

Both men replied that coffee would be nice.

In the kitchen, as Sam got to work on preparing the coffee for her guests, she heard the two detectives talking in her study. Due to the open ventilation between rooms, Sam was able to make out bits and pieces of the conversation.

Sam’s thoughts turned to Rodger, and for a moment she felt a surge of nostalgia. “Twenty years,” she muttered to herself, frowning as she fought against the slowly rising feelings of panic. “Why is he coming back into my life after twenty damn years?”

Memories assailed Sam of halcyon days. First came memories of wearing a pretty blue-and-white dotted dress, playing on a swing set at New Orleans City Park, and laughing mirthfully. Next, her handsome father, whose gentle eyes and kind face watched her with love as she played, approaching her with his arms outstretched. Then she running into her father’s arms and embracing him, burying her face in his chest. Last, she was offering her father a cypress blossom and placing it into the lapel of his jacket.

And then a different memory assaulted Sam, a memory of sitting in a police station as Rodger approached her with a grim

look upon his face. In this memory, Rodger held up a cypress flower, the petals ripped and torn from the stem.

With that, Samantha was shaken out of her thoughts by the sound of the coffeemaker beeping loudly, declaring its payload to be finished. She also heard Michael in the study expressing surprise that Samantha Castille was the author called “Sam of Spades.”

The revelation that an actual police detective was a fan of hers made Sam smile inwardly. She thought to herself, as she lifted the tray and hurried into the study, that she might have to give him an autograph.

Michael had taken a novella from the bookcase and was flipping through it. As Sam entered the study, he quickly closed it and started to put it back.

“Don’t worry about it. I don’t try to hide who I am,” Sam said as she placed the coffee tray on an uncluttered part of her desk and began pouring. “Actually, I’m surprised that Detective Ber—Rodger hasn’t told you that he knew Sam of Spades, Detective LeBlanc.”

“Call me Michael,” said the younger detective, putting down the novella and reaching out to take a cup of coffee. “Truthfully, collecting obscure mysteries is a hobby of mine. You know, authors like Sam of Spades, Gino Elk, and Richie Fastellos—just to name a few.”

Sam nodded in response to Michael’s comments, pouring Rodger his cup of coffee. She wasn’t at all surprised to be on the “obscure author” list, especially with an author like Gino Elk, who lived as a total recluse. However, one name did catch her off guard. “If I’m not mistaken, isn’t Richie Fastellos on the *New York Times* best-seller list now?”

“He is, indeed,” replied Michael, sipping his coffee and grinning wryly. “That’s why I don’t collect his books anymore. They’re too mainstream. Too successful.”

At that, Sam gave a short laugh, not sure what to make of Rodger’s new partner. He seemed to be ignorant of the fact that

his comments could be taken as insulting, and yet there was a sincerity to his candor that Sam appreciated.

“Well, Detective LeBlanc,” she said as she poured her own cup of coffee, “I may be a far step away from Fastellos, but it’s nice to meet a fan just the same.”

Her own cup of coffee made, Sam walked around the desk and took her seat. “So, Detectives, what can I do for you?” Sam said after she took a long gulp of the hot, sweet brew.

Rodger took a long sip from his cup and then put it down on the saucer, looking as if he didn’t want to have this conversation. That look reminded Sam of the same look he had given her at the police station twenty years ago. Sam did not like that look.

“It’s been a long night, Sam, so forgive me if I’m brusque,” Rodger started, looking her in the eyes for the first time since he knocked on her door. “There was a murder tonight in the French Quarter. The victim was killed in the same way as the Castille murders. I believe we have a copycat on the loose.”

It was not what Sam expected to hear, and once again memories, both unpleasant and incoherent, assailed her senses. The memory that drew Sam in the most was of a long hallway with a single door at the end and a feeling of impeccable dread.

Sam felt as if she were once again a child in a blue-and-white dotted dress standing in that long hallway. At the same time, she saw frightening images of a bloody hospital room, with walls lined with streaks of bloody handprints, and clinging globs of meat covering a bone saw and a pair of forceps.

The memories assaulted Sam’s senses—the memory of moving with legs like lead down that hallway, her heart pounding in her throat, her mouth dry with the exhale of terrified breath. Then in the next instant, Sam felt as if she were once again standing in the doorway and staring at a table with a dismembered body on it. An old man stood over the corpse, a bloodied scalpel in his hand. He turned to her and said, “Isn’t it wonderful, Sam? *Sam?*”

“Sam!”

Sam snapped back to reality, aware of the cool air of her study, aware of the clamminess of her skin—had she been sweat-

ing?—and aware that both Rodger and Michael were looking at her with concern, Michael halfway to his feet. The woman put down her coffee cup and shook her head as the two men passed a glance between each other.

“I’m sorry,” Sam said, avoiding eye contact, “but that was probably the last thing that I ever expected or wanted to hear.” Looking back up at the men, she offered a shaky smile. “So, how can I help you, Rodger?”

From his seat, Rodger leaned back, the look of concern on his face fading into silent understanding. Michael also leaned back, looking briefly once more toward his partner before turning his attention back to Sam.

Rodger immediately got down to business. “When your grandfather was put away, a box of his belongings remained out of police custody. Stuff from your father’s townhome, here, that the police couldn’t get a warrant for. I don’t remember all that was in it, but it’s the only evidence from the original case that we don’t have.”

Rodger finished off his coffee and leaned forward, partially to place the cup back on the tray, and partially to look Sam in the eyes. “It could really help us if we had that box, Sam.”

At first, the request seemed unusual to Sam, who wondered why a stash of her grandfather’s belongings could be helpful in finding a copycat killer. After a moment, however, she understood. Sipping her coffee, Sam nodded and said, “I see. You’re hoping that the contents of this box will help you think through how Grandfather committed his crimes. You’re trying to profile the killer.”

To Sam’s surprise, it was Michael who replied. “Exactly. By developing a profile of the copycat killer, we hope to catch him before he claims another victim.”

Rodger nodded to Michael before settling back in his chair again. “Can you do this for us, Sam? We may not be able to use it as evidence, but that’s the district attorney’s problem. Either way, if it helps us catch the killer, it will put this ugliness to an end.”

For a long moment, Sam sat there and considered things. She had never doubted her grandfather's guilt. Even with all of her efforts to forget those events in her life, Sam knew that she was the granddaughter of the most prolific serial killer in the history of New Orleans, perhaps all of Louisiana. She also knew that, despite the ties of blood, she hated Vincent Castille more than she hated anyone else in the world.

After several long moments of consideration, Sam said, "The box is up in the attic. If I give it to you, do you promise—" Her voice caught for a moment as an inexplicable feeling of fear seized her heart. "Do you promise to never bring it back to me? Destroy it or seal it away in one of those police evidence rooms of yours if you like. I just never want anything of Grandfather's in my home again."

Rodger nodded, giving Sam the most sympathetic look she had received in a very long time, before replying, "Of course, Sam. I'll make sure it never gets released to you."

"Good. Then wait right here," was Sam's brief response before standing up and leaving the study. Heading up the stairs, which were conveniently located in the front hallway, Sam bypassed the second floor, where the guest bedrooms were located, went past the third floor, where her own bedroom was located, and went up to the attic on the fourth floor.

The attic was stuffed with boxes and chests, mannequins with dresses of all sorts, and more junk than fire safety codes should ever allow. Each box, each chest, each container was meticulously labeled—a product of Sam stuffing a mansion's worth of junk into a townhome's storage space. She began to rummage, her brow furrowed and her headache back. By now, her thoughts were fully on the Bourbon Street Ripper murders. She was obsessively thinking about the vile things her grandfather had done to his victims.

"You bastard," Sam said between her teeth, "after all these years, you still haunt me. When the hell will you go away?"

Suddenly, Sam pulled back her hands as if her fingers had been bitten. When she came to her senses, she realized that she

had recoiled the moment she had touched the very box she was looking for. It wasn't a very large box, just two cubic feet, but it was old, was taped shut, and had written on it, very clearly, "Vincent Castille."

For another long moment, Sam kneeled back and looked at the box as if it were evil itself, her heart racing. The side of her head was pounding, her spine was tingling as if she was suddenly out in the cold, and she felt like she was going to pass out. It was like a memory was trying to force its way to the surface, one that carried nothing but pain.

Sam began to take deep breaths, pushing back the unpleasant memories, until she was calm. Only when she had calmed herself down did her cynical, tight-lipped smirk return. "There you are, Grandfather. The sooner you are out of my life, the better."

A few minutes later, Sam was returning to the study, carrying the old box. Without ceremony, she placed the box on her desk, right next to the coffee tray, and patted the top.

"Here you are, Rodger, and good riddance. Get this damn thing out of here." She was appreciative when he gave her a sympathetic nod.

Then she headed over to the mantle and absentmindedly straightened a few pictures, letting thoughts of the box slip out of her mind.

Rodger said, "Thanks. If we have any questions for you as the investigation continues, we'll call you. No more reasons to show up unannounced." He motioned his partner toward the box. "Michael, can you take that out to the car?"

Michael nodded before standing up and, grabbing the sides of the box, picked it up. For a moment, he shivered as if he was cold, and then his hands jerked violently. That was when the bottom binding of the box, covered only in old tape, broke with a loud rip, and the contents of the box spilled onto the carpet below, much like the entrails would spill from a slaughtered pig.

Everyone just stared at the broken box in Michael's hands before looking down at the contents. Scraps of paper, half-chewed

pencils, tattered remains of surgical masks, a golden pocket watch, a receipt book, a neatly folded map, and a miraculously unbroken jar of marbles all lay on the floor. A few objects rolled about the carpet, scattering in different directions.

“Oh, for God’s sake, Michael,” exclaimed Rodger as he got up to start gathering the miscellany together. “Don’t you know you’re supposed to hold old boxes by the bottom?”

Michael, who looked very flustered, apologized profusely before flipping the box over and helping his partner gather the contents to put back into the box. Sam soon joined them.

“It’s not Michael’s fault,” Sam quietly remarked to Rodger. “Everything connected to Grandfather finds a way to bring misery to others. It’s his curse.” She then offered a small smile to Michael. “Just be thankful it didn’t do this while you were outside in the rain.”

Michael gave Sam a grateful look. In a matter of minutes, the contents were back in the box and the box was securely in Michael’s arms. He was now holding the box from the bottom.

Sam looked around and said, “There, that should be everything. If I find anything else that rolled out, I’ll let you all know.”

“Thanks,” said Rodger, looking at his pocket watch. “We should get going, Sam. We need to get started on sorting through this mess.”

“And sorting through the box, too,” joked Michael, his remark sparking a soft laugh from Sam.

“Indeed,” said Sam, already feeling the relief of her grandfather’s last set of possessions leaving her home. It was like a huge weight had been lifted from her shoulders.

Leading both men toward the front door, Sam said, “And I have a deadline to make.”

At the foyer, Sam unlocked the latches and opened the front door. “So, if you have anything else that I can help you with, you’ll call me?”

“Correct,” Rodger answered, carefully stepping outside and down the front porch steps into the light drizzle, the raindrops

pattering gently on his trench coat. Michael followed, looking like he was holding on to the box for dear life.

“Sounds good,” Sam replied from the porch, arms folded as she leaned casually against one of the support posts. “Good luck catching the guy who’s doing this. Lord knows the *Times-Picayune* is going to have a field day reporting it.”

Roger shook his head.

“You ain’t kidding, Sam. It’ll be a media circus all over again.” Soon both detectives were getting into their car, Rodger fiddling with the safety belt for a few seconds before starting the car and driving off.

Sam watched them leave. For a moment, she was lost in thought, wondering why, after twenty years, this nightmare would return. Finally, she headed inside, latching the door tightly behind her.

“A Vincent Castille copycat,” Sam said to herself as she headed back into her study. “Maybe—just maybe—this will have a silver lining, in that I’ll finally be inspired.” It was a horrible thought, to draw inspiration from something as gruesome and horrific as the Bourbon Street Ripper murders, much less a copycat.

“Still,” Sam said, sitting at the desk and turning back to the typewriter, “if I don’t get my ass, or my act, together, then Grandfather’s inheritance will be the only thing I live off of . . . and God knows I don’t want anything that bastard left behind.”

With a firm resolution in mind, Sam laid her fingers on the keys of the typewriter once more.

“Okay, inspiration, come!”

Chapter 3:

Four Names, Four Leads

Date: Wednesday, August 5, 1992

Time: 10:00 a.m.

Location: New Orleans Police Precinct 8th District, the French Quarter

Sounds.

A cacophony of sounds.

Merged together in anything but harmony, the sounds of the New Orleans Police Department's 8th District were as varied as they were discordant. The most obvious of the sounds were the voices—dozens of human voices, each having their own independent conversations, some of them outright raucous. Sinking beneath those voices was the hum and clatter of an old photocopier as it spit out papers at irregular intervals. Floating along with those voices were the sounds of fingers clacking on keyboards, doors opening and closing, and shoes clapping against the linoleum floor.

And finally, rising above the murmur of those voices were two shrill sounds that cut through the others like a knife. One was the incessant ringing of an unanswered telephone, while the other was the bleating cry of an ill-tempered infant.

Not to be outdone by the sound was the smell, that humid and pungent odor of a building with too many sweaty bodies on a hot afternoon. The only thing keeping the atmosphere from being choking were the dozen or so ceiling fans running at full speed high above the floor.

The floor of the precinct was almost like a grid, rows upon rows of desks facing each other and forming walkways just big enough for two adults to walk side-by-side. Five by five the rows were laid out, giving a total of fifty detectives their floor space. The walls were littered with doors leading into the offices of sergeants and lieutenants, interrogation rooms, and storage closets. At one end of the large room was an office twice the size of the others, with two large glass windows framing either side of the door. It was the office of the 8th District commander.

Michael LeBlanc knew the layout of the precinct well, for on his first day he memorized where everything was located. Memorizing things was something of a hobby for Michael, who was almost like a computer, filing away facts, conversations, maps, and crime scenes into his mind, ready to call back later with perfect clarity. It was something of a gift, or so he had been told at an early age by his mother, who would go around announcing that her son would become the brightest neurosurgeon to come out of Shreveport. That was before Michael enlisted in the police academy, or applied for a transfer to New Orleans, rendering him more the family's black sheep than their pride and joy.

Michael didn't care. He had wanted to be a police detective as far back as he could remember.

Waiting at his desk for Rodger, Michael looked over the contents of the box they had procured from Samantha Castille, even though he had already committed the contents to memory. Most of it, Michael had to admit, was useful to prove more that Dr. Castille was a lunatic than a killer: stacks of notebooks with insane ramblings about how man's mortal soul can only achieve transcendence through ultimate suffering, printed clippings from occult magazines about consuming the soul of one's enemy, and diagrams of the human neural pathways.

Yeah, thought Michael, this guy was whacked out of his gourd. It's as if he really believed that by murdering others, he could use their souls to extend his own natural lifespan. Not only that, but his philosophy that pain and suffering reinforced identity is as antiquated as it is barbaric.

Michael's thoughts were interrupted by the sound of a loud, "Get your fucking hands off me!" Looking up quickly, he saw a rough-looking man wearing a jacket proudly displaying the Hell's Angels logo, his face as bearded as it was scarred, being forcibly escorted by two uniformed officers toward an interrogation room.

Trailing behind them was a senior detective barking orders to the two officers, saying, "Escort Mr. Jones to the interrogation room. And one of you, get his dumb ass a bandage."

Stopping an officer passing by, Michael inquired what was going on.

"Oh, that," replied the officer, a young man who was clearly trying not to get involved. "There was a break-in at the Riverwalk this morning, just before the shops opened. Keith Jones, one of the bikers who hangs out 'round there, didn't take kindly to Detective Aucoin questioning his girl about it. The two exchanged words, then Jones's fist exchanged personal space with Aucoin's face. Best to just stay out of it, if you ask me."

Michael looked toward Senior Detective Kyle Aucoin, who was trying to look as dignified as a man can look while blotting up a bloody nose. Aucoin soon disappeared into a side room, cussing with a level of vulgarity that made Michael's ears burn.

"Is Dixie still on vacation?" Michael asked the nearby officer. One of his closest friends, Dixie Olivier, Kyle Aucoin's partner, had been on vacation with her boyfriend for only a few days. As far as Michael knew, she'd be gone for at least another week.

"From what I know, yes, but the commander is thinking of calling her back after that murder in the French Quarter last night."

With that, the officer walked off, leaving Michael to wonder if both Rodger and the police commander were jumping the gun on declaring this a copycat, or if they were both on the right track.

The media was already calling it a Vincent Castille copycat murder.

In the background, the ill-tempered infant continued to bleat its cries. Michael looked over and saw that the infant belonged to a

woman, most likely a battered wife, who was giving a report while trying to tend to her baby. He thought she should probably check that kid's diaper.

"I'm back," replied Rodger, making Michael abandon his thoughts once more. He saw that Rodger was offering him a Styrofoam cup of coffee. Michael didn't particularly care for coffee one way or another, but his partner, and everyone else in New Orleans, seemed to live on it. Not one to rock the status quo, Michael took the proffered cup with thanks, holding it for the moment. It was too hot to drink anyway. Michael recalled that Rodger had a habit of scorching his coffee, making what was normally a bitter drink particularly vile.

"Welcome back," said Michael as he pushed the crying infant, the bloodied Aucoin, and any other distractions out of his mind. Focusing on Rodger, Michael asked the question that had been on his mind since his partner was called down to the coroner's office two hours prior: "So, what did Morton say?"

"Well, give me a second to get out my notebook," Rodger said, sipping his coffee before leaning down behind his desk.

While Rodger was distracted, Michael quickly leaned over to a vacant desk across from his desk and opened a drawer. In it were several cups of long-since cooled and abandoned coffee. Placing the new cup into the drawer and closing it, Michael turned back to his partner before the latter noticed anything.

Rodger plopped down his notebook, then reached into his coat pocket and fished out a neatly folded coroner's report. Holding it out toward Michael, he said, "First off, we're lucky as shit that Morton bumped our body up to the top of the list. But I suspect that's more thanks to the chief's office than anything else."

"Probably," answered Michael, leaning forward and focusing on the paper in the older man's hands. "The media is already having a field day. One slip that last night's murder could be similar to the Bourbon Street Ripper murders and every talk show and radio program is running commentary, ready to theorize that this is everything from a copycat to the ghost of Dr. Vincent Castille."

Rodger nodded grimly, with a disgusted look. Michael wasn't sure this was a copycat—not based on one murder—but Rodger had obviously already convinced himself that it was. Michael shrugged and said, “Well, the commander wants to know one way or another, and he's already leaning toward the copycat side of the argument. So, what did Morton find out?”

Rodger unfolded the report and handed it to his partner. “Well, the victim was in our system, so she's been identified. Her name was Virginia Babineaux, otherwise known by her street name, Virgin Baby.”

Michael couldn't help but smirk at that name as he took the report and got himself oriented. “Lady of the night, eh?”

With a nod, Rodger leaned back in his chair and, scribbling in his notebook, continued, “This goes against the doc's MO, though. Dr. Castille never went for prostitutes or derelicts. His victims were always upstanding middle-class citizens. College honor students, well-mannered housewives, daughters of civil servants. Those sorts of people.”

Putting down the report, Michael was caught by one of the phrases: “*daughters of civil servants.*” In the depths of Michael's mind, a lightbulb suddenly illuminated. “Wait, you mean like the daughter of Morton Melancon?” One look at the frown that crossed his older partner's lips, and Michael knew that he was correct.

“Morton's daughter was the third victim,” said Rodger, shaking his head in disgust. “It was actually Edward who told Morton what had happened. I didn't have the stomach for it. Sent Morton on a five-year sabbatical, nearly made the poor guy lose his mind. I suspect that even if the chief hadn't told Morton to bump our case to the top, he'd have done it anyway.”

Well, that explains his reaction last night, thought Michael. He went back to looking over the autopsy report. His eyes moved like the scanner on a fax machine, taking it in line by line. When he set down the report at last, Michael closed his eyes and visualized the entire report. There it was in his mind, clear as day, down to Morton's accidental transposition of the letters *i* and *e* in *their*.

Opening his eyes, Michael rejoined his partner in the conversation. "So this killer is already doing something different from the doc. He chose someone who is less than an upstanding member of society."

"Correct," replied Rodger, sipping his coffee again. "Which means if another of these pop up and she's in the same social class as the first one, we've got us an MO."

Michael looked grim as he nodded in agreement. "Although, if we're lucky, this was a one-time situation, and there won't be another one of these 'popping up.'"

To Michael's dismay, Rodger immediately shook his head, saying, "I've been on the force over forty years, and my gut is almost never wrong. My gut tells me, Michael, that this is just the beginning."

For a long moment, Michael was silent. He heard the infant in the background still crying, although not with as much strain to its voice. *Someone must be trying to comfort it, at least*, thought Michael, who gave a sigh and began spreading out the various pieces of evidence obtained from Sam Castille. He didn't want to believe that Rodger was correct, but his own gut didn't offer any solace.

After a few moments, Michael began, "Well, Vincent took one victim every seven days, correct? That gives us six days to find and identify the killer before the next victim goes missing. Now, I've been sorting through this stuff we got from Sam and have come up with several things."

Michael produced a stack of receipts, bound together with a rubber band. "First, we have these receipts. All of these show the purchase of the hardware that the doc used to perform his murders. For each murder, he bought new power tools, new tubing, new everything."

"Except his scalpel," stated Rodger, taking the receipts and looking through them. "He used the same scalpel for every murder. He also used the scalpel, and not anything else, to finally kill his victims. Did the same kind of cut given for an autopsy."

Everything else was either to torture during the killing, or to dismember afterward.”

“Right,” replied Michael. “And according to the autopsy report, the cuts on Ms. Babineaux were made from a hacksaw, a wire cutter, a circular saw, and a scalpel.”

“Same as the doc,” said Rodger, tossing the receipts back onto Michael’s side of the desk.

“But not quite, Rodger,” said Michael, tapping the upturned autopsy report. “Morton clearly states that the scalpel cuts were amateurish, that they didn’t have the precision of a trained surgeon. That means that the killer doesn’t have any training as a physician.”

As Rodger nodded, Michael continued, grabbing a similar bundle of receipts. “Now these receipts are from various restaurants around town. Commander’s Palace, Arnold’s, and Café Giovanni, just to name a few. Each receipt is always from the same night that the body was discovered.”

“That’s no surprise,” Rodger said, finishing up his coffee and tossing the cup into their already overflowing trash can. “At the trial, the doc was profiled as treating himself to a nice meal after every murder, sort of a reward for a job well done.”

Michael couldn’t hide his disgust at Vincent Castille as he continued. “The point I am getting at is that the doc’s case was highly publicized twenty years ago. So all these facts would be available for someone who knew where to look, correct? So, if this is a real copycat, like we suspect, then he will do more than just murder like Vincent Castille.”

Rodger looked up, the look on his face showing Michael that they were both arriving at the same conclusion. With a quick nod, the older man said, “Right, and since a copycat will want to emulate the full Vincent Castille experience, if we analyze lists such as recent hardware purchases and expensive restaurants . . .”

“. . . we can find our man,” finished Michael with a smile. He and Rodger had solved many cases this way, arriving at the same conclusion over conversation. The younger man knew that he

and his partner were as different as night and day, but when they worked together as a cohesive team, they could solve any case.

Michael sometimes wondered if Rodger, and not Edward, was the one who had solved the original case.

Rodger motioned toward the contents of the box Sam had given them. "So, then, what else do we have here?"

Michael gestured toward the stacks of notebooks, article clippings, and diagrams. "Well, all that stuff just shows the depths of Vincent's insanity. The guy seemed obsessed with studying how much people could be made to suffer, as well as dabbling in that occult nonsense."

Rodger picked up a few clippings and glanced over them, sighing softly before saying, "Yeah, the doc's defense tried to put a voodoo spin on things in order to go for an insanity plea. It didn't work, of course. The doc was too lucid, and never rambled about 'the occult this' or 'black magic that.' Still, they presented it really well. At times, voodoo almost made sense."

Michael wasn't surprised. Variations of "The devil made me do it" were centuries old. When facing the death penalty, especially for crimes this heinous, Michael supposed that anyone could be persuaded to try any defense, no matter how ludicrous.

Michael reached down to fish out a small pocket notebook from the pile of belongings. "Then there's this," he said, waving the small notebook. "It's just a list of names and old phone numbers."

Michael tossed the notebook to his partner. "Mean anything to you, Rodger?"

Rodger opened the notebook and looked at it. Within a moment, the older man's lips curled down into a frown. "These are aliases, Michael. No one, not even in one of Sam's detective stories, goes by the names Topper Jack, Mad Monty, Fat Willie, or Blind Moses."

With a chuckle, Michael shook his head. "I knew that. I also called the phone company and tried to get their records of who

owned those phone numbers back then. Of course, I was told that this was too far in the past to . . .”

Michael stopped and grew silent as his partner suddenly slapped his desk.

“Oh, of course,” exclaimed Rodger. “I think I know who these guys are!”

Michael, who rarely saw Rodger have a *eureka* moment, just stared.

Rodger continued, “The prosecution always contended that Vincent had to have one, if not more, accomplices. It makes sense, since a sixty-five-year-old man shouldn’t have been able to carry out those murders alone. However, Vincent never gave anyone any information about who could have helped him. And since the stuff in this box”—Rodger waved the notebook—“was in his son’s townhome, and thus was never under a search warrant, we never got an idea of who they could be.”

Michael stood up and went to the side of his partner, looking at the small notebook again. “Accomplices, you say? This adds a new dimension to the investigation. So you think these aliases are those people?”

With a nod, Rodger looked up at his partner. “That’s my hunch. And I happen to know who can help us. A retired cop by the name of Douglas Dugas. My mentor, actually. Back in the seventies, he had his hands on every Tom, Dick, and Harry that had any information in this town. If anyone, and I mean anyone, in New Orleans would know who these four were, and where we could find them, it would be him.”

Their conversation was interrupted by an earsplitting crash.

Rodger jumped up and pushed Michael back while putting his hand to his sidearm.

What the hell is happening? Michael thought as he hit the ground. Quickly, he got back to his feet, and immediately saw the cause of the commotion—the biker, Jones, had broken free of an interrogation room by knocking the door off its hinges. All around him was a swarm of uniformed officers, and the sheer violence of the

biker's outbreak had caused everyone nearby to dive behind their desks.

In the background, the infant shrieked in terror.

"Holy shit!" exclaimed one of the officers as Jones grabbed a nearby chair and swung it at him, barely missing. "Someone bring this guy down, now!"

Three officers leapt on the biker, swinging their batons at his head. Jones seemed to ignore the repeated blows, and instead rammed his fists in two of the three's midsections. As the sound of cracking ribs resonated throughout the room, Michael heard the one uninjured officer saying, "Shit! It's like this guy's immune to pain!"

That comment got Michael's mind spinning, and he said, "Rodger! Sounds like this guy is high on something like PCP! Beating him with those batons isn't going to do anything."

Before his partner could react or protest, Michael was running toward the carnage.

The biker had just picked up the third police officer, who was screaming for someone to help him, when Michael reached the heart of the fray. All around were other detectives and officers, as well as citizens, most likely there just to file reports or follow up with investigations. Loosening his tie, Michael called out, "*Keith Jones!*"

Keith turned around and, seeing Michael, threw the officer he was holding to the side. Unfortunately, that happened to be just where Aucoin, who had emerged from the side room right after the mayhem started, was standing. The two crumpled into an ignominious heap.

As Jones turned to fully face Michael, the younger detective took a moment to calm his nerves. This man was huge—easily six feet tall and muscular—and high on something that made him immune to pain and fear.

Michael thought, *I have one chance to take this guy down. If I'm off by even a few inches, I'm screwed.*

With a frothing cry of “Up yours, copper,” Jones ran at Michael, arms outstretched, mouth opened wide, tongue flapping out—generally making the man look like a maniac. His eyes, pupils heavily dilated, focused on Michael as a hunter does its prey. Michael stood his ground and watched, waiting, calculating.

A little more, Michael thought. A few more feet. Come on, you sad sack, you’re doing exactly what I anticipated, running straight at me.

Just as Jones was within arm’s length of Michael, Michael dropped down, his right shoulder dropping, and his arm getting in a relaxed position to strike. It looked, to anyone watching, like Michael planned on hitting the biker between the legs.

But just as Michael’s body dipped down, he suddenly came up, bringing his right hand up as fast as a bullet. His hand opened and his palm connected with the underside of Jones’s jaw, bringing his mouth shut so hard that part of the biker’s tongue flew off and onto the floor nearby. Jones’s eyes rolled up in the back of his head as Michael moved quickly behind him and, jumping up, brought his elbow down on the back of the biker’s head.

The baby in the background stopped crying.

The hit was hard enough that blood spewed from Jones’s mouth as he slumped forward into a heap. Landing from his elbow attack, Michael turned back and stared for a long moment at the now prone biker, his eyes still rolled back. Michael viewed him with remorseful pity.

In an instant, the other officers were all over Jones, cuffing him and dragging him away. Already the biker was conscious again and screaming about having bitten off part of his tongue, leaving a bloody trail on the floor as a reminder.

Joined by his partner, who whistled and patted him on the back, Michael did the only logical next step.

He straightened his tie.

“BERGERON!” came out a loud voice that reeked of authority. “LEBLANC! AUCOIN! GET YOUR ASSES IN HERE NOW!”

“Crap,” said Rodger, giving a defeated sigh. “The commander wants to see all three of us.”

Aucoin, who had since extricated himself from the inglorious pile, winced at Ouellette’s voice, saying, “Shit, Rodger, we are going to get our asses torn apart!”

Michael said nothing, still coming down off of the high of the fight. All three men headed toward Ouellette’s office.

Commander Louis Ouellette’s office was what one would expect a police commander’s to be—clean and orderly. In fact, the lack of ornamentation pointed to a spartan attitude, one that supported Ouellette’s status as an armed forces veteran. On his bookcase, Commander Ouellette displayed a photo of himself posing with President Nixon, as well as a folded American flag in a shadow box. His desk had only two photos, one of his late wife posing in front of a Christmas tree, and one of his daughter and grandchildren playing in Audubon Park.

As for Ouellette himself, the only things that screamed military more than his spit-cleaned uniform and complete lack of hair were his ferocious gaze and his manner of screaming out half his sentences. And to Michael, as the three detectives entered their superior’s office, it seemed that Ouellette was spoiling for a good ass-reaming.

“What the bloody hell, and I do mean *what the bloody hell* just happened out there?!” started off Commander Ouellette in his generally congenial way. Having spewed out his question, the police commander just stared at each man in turn, as if his gaze alone could result in a full confession.

Michael drew in a breath. Even though he had subdued Keith Jones without drawing his sidearm, he had beaten the hell out of a citizen. That kind of thing never went well. It was a sure-fire way to get Internal Affairs involved. Commander Ouellette had a policy of protecting his own, but only when his own kept him in the loop. Michael knew that, just as he knew that if he had taken the time to inform his superior of his plan, someone would have gotten severely injured. Or worse.

“It was—” Michael started to say.

“The blame is all on me, Commander,” Aucoin interrupted. “I didn’t have Jones frisked before being brought into the precinct. If I hadn’t been negligent, he’d have never used whatever he’s on and caused all this shit.” Aucoin nodded his head toward Michael. “If the newbie hadn’t jumped in with that karate shit, Jones woulda ripped someone’s head off.”

Michael was stunned into silence, even as Commander Ouellette’s gaze moved from him to Aucoin and back. Everyone knew that Aucoin was a hard-ass who didn’t respect rookies until they earned it. So for him to take the fall like this was shocking.

“Fine,” said Commander Ouellette at last, nodding his head toward the door, “you’re desked for the next two days. Get a report ready for Internal Affairs. You know they’re going to be up our ass about this.”

Aucoin left without so much as a glance toward Michael or Rodger.

Once he was gone, Commander Ouellette turned back toward the two detectives. Regarding Michael with the gaze of a drill sergeant, Ouellette asked, “So that was some fancy shit you did, LeBlanc. Where’d you learn it?”

Michael hated that his commander called him by his last name, but he knew that he referred to everyone that way. Even Rodger, who had apparently known Ouellette from childhood, was no exception. Michael answered, “Muay Thai kickboxing, Commander.”

Commander Ouellette seemed impressed, sitting down as he gestured for the pair to sit as well. “You a black belt, then?”

As Michael took a seat, he explained, “Muay Thai doesn’t have a ranking system. But yes, I’d be comparable to a black belt in something like karate.”

“Very good, LeBlanc,” stated the police commander. Michael knew that was the only praise he’d get and was unsurprised when his superior moved onward with the conversation. “So, where are you two on that French Quarter murder last night?”

Rodger picked up the conversation, something that didn't bother Michael at all. "Well, Commander, we've gone through a box of evidence donated by Samantha Castille, and we've found a potential lead on profiling the killer—that is, if the killer is a copycat."

With a *tsh* sound, Commander Ouellette shook his head. "Keep an eye out for that Samantha. The Castilles are nothing but trouble. But with the way that the chief's and district attorney's office is acting, it damn well better be a copycat. And don't get me started on the media. The newscast this morning is already calling this "The New Bourbon Street Ripper."

"Pardon me, Commander," interjected Michael. "I understand that everyone is anxious to call this a full-fledged copycat, but we can't be sure just off of one murder. Serial killers have to establish a patt—"

"Yeah, LeBlanc, I know that," interrupted Commander Ouellette. "And not one single member of the brass, including the DA and the goddamn mayor, wants to wait for another body to show up. So what leads do you have to find this guy and put him away before the city gets plunged into hell again?"

Again Rodger led the discussion, causing Michael to sit back and wonder if respect was something that was earned in ways other than stopping a biker high on PCP without killing him.

"We've got a lead on some potential accomplices from the Castille murders," continued Rodger. "Potentially, the DA's office could have new people to charge with aiding and abetting those murders. Also, if this is indeed a copycat, perhaps one of these people knows something that can help us."

In the depths of Michael's mind, another lightbulb went off, but he kept his mouth shut for now, allowing his partner and their superior to finish.

"Good job, Bergeron," Commander Ouellette said. "You and LeBlanc get out there and see if you can make any sense of this madness. Report back to me when you have something—anything—new that I can push on upward."

Both men nodded in agreement and got up. A minute later, they were heading down the hall toward the garage. Along the way, Michael had to ward off a storm of applause and praise, fellow officers and detective patting his shoulder and calling him “Karate Kid.” Michael got the reference, but he hated that movie with a passion, so his only reaction, even as he caught up with his partner, was an annoyed scowl.

“Hey, Rodger,” said Michael as they made their escape.

“Hey, Kara—” Rodger started, stopping when Michael shot him a dangerous look. “I mean, hey, Michael, what’s on your mind?”

Michael recounted the revelation he had in Ouellette’s office. “I just had a theory. What if one of those four people in this notebook”—Michael patted his coat pocket—“is actually the killer? It would make sense if someone already associated with Vincent Castille would murder people like he did.”

As Rodger opened up the door to the garage, he shook his head. “Michael, if we could only be that lucky.”

The Bourbon Street Ripper will be released on October 31, 2012.

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