

A Life Without Fear

SINS OF THE FATHER: BOOK TWO



By Leo King

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Fear

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To Janna and Carol,

the two women in my life
who told me to just “write it down.”

A Life Without Fear is the second volume in the
Sins of the Father trilogy. Sam’s story begins
in *The Bourbon Street Ripper* and concludes in
the final volume, *Face Behind the Mask*.

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Finally, thanks to Janna, the best wife a guy could have. It's been a great journey, hun, and it's just beginning. We'll make it to Munich yet!

If you want to solve the mystery . . .

keep an open mind . . .

question everything . . .

and pay attention to what Sam writes.

— Leo King

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Prologue

Date: Saturday, August 9, 1992

Time: 12:00 a.m.

Location: Office of Kent Bourgeois
Central Business District

“I don’t care how high the property tax in that area is, just buy the damn place.” Kent spoke into the receiver, a barbed edge to his tone. He was silent for a few moments as someone spoke to him from the other end.

“I already told you, it’s for a charity that Madame Castille is investing in this autumn.” His voice was starting to sound strained. Taking out a white cotton kerchief with an embroidered “G.C.” on it, he wiped some sweat off his brow. “No, don’t use the usual account, she’ll never sign the check in time. Poor thing has been in a knot lately over the new Bourbon Street Ripper murders.”

After a moment, he said, “Yes. Use that account. It’s better for everyone that way, I think.”

After another pause, he nodded. “Yes, that’s it exactly. Very good. Corner of Bourbon and Canal. Call me—no, email me—when the transaction is complete. I’ll be busy all day today with the Castille accounts. Huge mess to clean up there.”

With that said, he hung up the phone and mopped some sweat from his brow. “Christ, the weather is muggy. Are we due for a storm soon?” He absentmindedly played with his gold wedding band, which shone with a newly polished luster. He hoped not. It was the middle

of hurricane season, and a bad storm could spell big trouble for the Big Easy.

Kent's phone rang again, jarring him from his thoughts. He nearly jumped out of his seat from the sudden noise. Grabbing the phone, he said, "Eddie, didn't I tell you to—oh, hello, son." His voice went from irritated to cool. "Yes, everything is fine. Please stop worrying. No, there's no need to do anything like that. If you need more money, I'll transfer some into your account tomorrow."

He loosened his necktie and finished mopping the sweat off his brow as he listened. Finally, he said, "It's not rocket science, son. You just have to follow the instructions I gave you. They were exceedingly explicit. God, if your mother saw what a disappointment you turned out to be . . ."

He pulled the receiver away from his ear as incoherent yelling ripped through the other end of the line.

After the noise died down, he put the phone back to his ear and said, "And you prove my point, son. Instead of using the education that I paid for to do something useful, you work for that low-class newspaper. Instead of becoming something admirable, like a police officer, you choose to just screw one. And instead of helping your father out when he needs you the most, you call him while drunk and complain about how broke you are. What a model son you are."

Again, he lifted the receiver away from his ear as the shouting crackled out like fireworks on New Year's Eve. When Kent finally spoke back into the phone, his tone was considerably colder. "We had a deal, son. You help get me out of this jam I'm in and I make sure you have all the money you need to booze up, shoot up, or get messed up with that little cop friend of yours. Are you trying to back out?"

After a measure of silence, the voice on the other end of the line responded. Kent smiled wryly. "Good boy. Then I'll contact you tomorrow. For now, try to sleep off whatever you're on. You sound like a damn moron. Good night."

He hung up the phone.

For a few moments, he ran his fingers over a neatly folded letter on his desk. Then he placed it in his desk drawer and pulled out a

bottle of Scotch. He poured himself a third of a glass, removed his necktie completely, and then took a long draft.

He sighed. "I swear, if my marriage doesn't get me killed, my stupid son will." He sat back, closed his eyes, and continued to sip his drink. "This new Bourbon Street Ripper couldn't have come at a worse time."

Chapter 1

Old Friends and New Leads

Date: Sunday, August 9, 1992
Time: 6:00 a.m.
Location: Esplanade Apartments
New Orleans City Park

Water. Cool, clean, comforting water. Water that washed away the dirt, the grime, and the sins of the previous day.

Junior Detective Dixie Olivier's eyes were closed as she felt that water cascade down her back, over her buttocks, and down her legs to the shower floor below. Leaning back, she reached up and massaged her scalp, rubbing in the shampoo. Her motions were slow and deliberate. They eased her troubled mind—and she had a lot troubling her.

The copycat serial killer dubbed “the new Bourbon Street Ripper” had the city in a panic and had caused some sort of harm to almost everyone she cared about. Her best friend, Junior Detective Michael LeBlanc, was still unconscious in the hospital, having been shot in the line of duty. Her partner, Senior Detective Kyle Aucoin, was being torn in three different directions—the case, his failing marriage, and his missing daughter. And her superior, Commander Louis Ouellette, was being pressured by City Hall to do whatever it took to find and arrest the killer.

Needless to say, quiet moments like these were getting rarer for her.

Rinsing off her hair, Dixie renewed her resolve to keep the investigation on track. Once Aucoin arrived, she'd bring up her list of

notes on the case and suggest their next move. As a detective, she was organized and well-practiced at sorting facts, not to mention she had a reputation for being damn good at interviewing. However, she felt that her true strength lay in analyzing situations and discovering patterns. She only hoped she'd get a chance to let that side of herself shine.

Hair rinsed, she turned off the shower and dried off before throwing on her robe, slipping on her slippers, and heading out of the bathroom.

The bedroom was mostly dark, the sun still down and the drapes drawn closed. In the shadows of the room, she made out the sleeping outline of Gino, her long-term boyfriend. His muscular form lay still beneath the sheets, his chest slowly rising and falling. She felt a flush come to her cheeks and an increase in her pulse. She dearly loved him.

Dixie hurriedly got dressed in a fresh pair of slacks and a blouse. Once her socks and shoes were on, she softly and quietly kissed Gino on the cheek. "Love you, honey. Be here when I get back." It was something they always said to each other.

Without another word, she went to the front of their apartment.

The Esplanade at City Park was way out of the price range for someone living on a detective's salary, but fortunately for her, the apartment was in Gino's name. Besides being independently wealthy, he made a comfortable income writing scripts for a nationally syndicated soap opera, as well as the occasional Harlequin romance novel. He preferred a life of seclusion. To most of the other residents, he was simply "that nice, quiet Greek fellow."

As she entered the front room, the cordless phone in the kitchenette rang. She hurried over and picked it up. Her voice was low and scolding. "Whoever you are, don't you realize it's six in the morning? Are you out of your—"

"It's Ouellette," came the voice of her commander.

Immediately, Dixie straightened up and cleared her throat. "Apologies, sir. What's going on?"

"I'm taking Aucoin off the case for a few days," Ouellette said. "He's obsessed over Cheryl's disappearance and has convinced himself that she's going to turn up as the third victim."

She didn't flinch. She was used to her commander being less than sensitive about others' problems. "Can you blame him, though? Cheryl may not fit the profile Michael and Rodger have been working on, but his daughter did just go missing."

"Teenage girls go missing all the time," he said, irritation in his voice. "That doesn't mean every one of them is the victim of a serial killer."

Asshole. She waited to hear what he had to say next.

He sighed, the irritation in his voice replaced by a noticeable strain. "But I'm giving him a few days to get his shit straight, find her, and get back with the program with the rest of us. Whoever this killer is, he's moving much faster than Vincent—one victim every other day instead of one a week. So we need to step up our game as well. For now, you're paired up with Bergeron. He's on his way to get you. Report to me before heading out." Ouellette hung up.

For a few moments, Dixie stood there holding the phone and then slowly hung it up. She had thought the pressure would be getting to her commander, and she was right.

She picked up on others' emotions very easily, a trait that helped her considerably as a detective. While she didn't consider herself to have Michael's level of brilliance—something she admired—she was able to combine her analytical skill with an understanding of people's emotions. This also gave her an edge in interrogation.

Except in some cases, such as when she and Aucoin had interviewed Richard Fastellos, the bumbling goof who was Sam's boyfriend. She hadn't been able to get a good read on him, and he had snatched the interview from them with a smirk on his lips.

Dixie felt her mouth tighten and her skin heat up as he remembered how Richie had played her. She hated him for that. She hated it anytime an arrogant, domineering man got the best of a situation, and she had good reason to. *I'll get that son of a bitch back for showing me up.*

She pushed away those angry thoughts and turned on the lights to the front room.

The dinner table in the dining area was covered in hers and Gino's paperwork, as well as his word processor and her overcoat, pager,

and holstered pistol. She finished getting ready by strapping on her holster, throwing on her overcoat, and making sure that her badge was secured.

Not sure how long Rodger would take to arrive, she sat on the leather couch in the living area and turned on the television. It was the usual morning broadcast. The weather was hot and muggy, the traffic was terrible, and the top story of the hour was, of course, the new Bourbon Street Ripper.

Dixie shook her head in disgust. The media sensationalism was amazing. It seemed like the news stations and the *Times-Picayune* alike were more interested in the ratings than the real story. Talking heads gave theories ranging from the sound to the ludicrous, and everyone had an opinion.

Of course, the prime suspect was the unknown writer called Sam of Spades, who had published the first chapter in a serial story that had detailed the second murder before it had even happened.

She was grateful that the district attorney had placed a gag order on the *Times-Picayune*. If the public discovered that Sam of Spades was none other than Samantha Castille, granddaughter of the original Bourbon Street Ripper, she'd be lynched by a mob of frightened, angry citizens before anyone could blink.

"In other news," said the anchorman, "Saint Tammany Parish deputies arrested a man late last night for domestic violence. Mr. Gregory Descheneaux was arrested in his home after neighbors called in complaining they could hear his eight-year-old daughter crying out for help. The girl, Noella, was taken to the hospital with severe injuries."

Dixie sat, transfixed in horror. She never liked watching the news alone, for fear that a domestic violence story like this one would trigger memories of when she was a little girl.

She did not like remembering her childhood.

She had been born Dixie Electra Gateaux and had grown up in Slidell, a city northeast of New Orleans, just across Lake Pontchartrain. Like most families in Slidell, Dixie's was poor. She grew up in a trailer park with her parents and older sister. Throughout her childhood, poverty and instability tore her family apart.

As long as she could remember, her father had been unemployed and almost constantly intoxicated. Emotionally and verbally abusive, he would take his drunken frustrations out on every single member of the family on a daily basis. Her mother was an enabler who just kept making excuses and claiming he'd get better once he found a job.

Her older sister had reacted by staying out late, taking to smoking and extreme promiscuity by age twelve. By her fifteenth year, she had become pregnant with the child of a twenty-six-year-old man.

When her father had found out, he had snapped, and his verbal abuse had turned physical. Dixie had been only ten years old when she had watched her drunken father beat her older sister into a miscarriage. When her mother had finally tried to intervene, he had broken her jaw. The police were only called after Dixie, who had been hiding underneath her bed, ran to a neighbor and begged for help.

Immediately, her and her older sister became wards of the state, placed into separate foster homes.

Dixie was jarred out of the emotional trip down memory lane by the doorbell ringing. She realized she had been crying, and she took a moment to wipe the tears away before answering the front door.

"Morning, Dixie," said Rodger. The bags under his eyes were apparent, but she must have looked even worse, since he looked at her with concern. "I can wait down in the car if you need a few minutes to, um, finish getting ready."

"Thank you," she said, giving him an appreciative smile. It was obvious that he knew she was crying but was too much of a gentleman to say anything. After he left, she washed off her face. She appreciated his not asking what was wrong.

A few minutes later, she went downstairs and found him parked at the roundabout in front of the apartments, leaning against his squad car and smoking a cigarette. Nearby, a doorman was motioning to a public ashtray.

Seeing Rodger like that made Dixie smile. Despite his looking more and more like he was at the end of his career, he had a reputation for being a good cop who wanted to do the right thing. Everything about him reminded her of a detective from a gritty noir film—a hard-boiled cop with a heart of gold.

"You ready to go?" Rodger asked, tossing his cigarette into the public ashtray. The doorman mouthed a "thank you."

She nodded, and the two got into the car. "Do we have an agenda today, Rodger?" she asked as she latched her seatbelt shut.

"One moment," he said, fighting to get his seatbelt to catch. Once it did, he fished out a series of Post-It notes and flipped through them. "Let me see what we're doing today."

Dixie watched him and tried not to laugh. The way he flipped through his Post-It notes with a look of concentration was the same way her foster father would concentrate when sorting through bills. That made her very comfortable.

"Here we go," Rodger said at last. He was holding out a single note. "What we've got is a lead for the Nite Priory."

She recalled that the Nite Priory, currently believed to be a cult of some sort, was the group who had left instructions for three out of the four accomplices of the original Bourbon Street Ripper. Topper Jack, as well as Mad Monty and Fat Willie, who were both now deceased, had all been contacted by this group to assist them with the new murders. The only accomplice not accounted for was Blind Moses, the supposed courier who had carried Vincent's orders to the others.

"Good to know," she said, reading the note. "Jonathon Russell, eh? Never heard of him."

"You can thank Richie for this lead. One of the few things he's done right," Rodger said as he pulled out of the apartment's roundabout. "Jonathon's a rich guy. You know, old money. Lives on Lake Pontchartrain in a mansion, like the Castilles. A bit of a recluse, actually. Took Ouellette himself calling in a favor to get us the interview."

Dixie's lips tightened again at the mention of Richie's name, but she fought back any snarky comments. Instead, she focused on the task at hand. "Old money like the Castilles, eh? We're headed there right now, yes?"

Rodger shook his head. "Nope. Need to head into the precinct first. Ouellette wants to talk to us. Probably to give us some instructions we have to follow . . . or else." He accented the words "or else."

Despite herself, she giggled at his display. That helped them both relax. She found herself sliding into the same kind of groove as she had

with Aucoin. She thought they'd get along just fine. She was looking forward to working with him.

It was two hours later when they finally finished meeting with Ouellette. On their way to Lake Pontchartrain, they stopped at a convenience store to get some coffee. While Rodger had gotten the usual, a dark roast with very little added to it, Dixie had bought one of those premade coffee drinks. It was more her style. As Rodger made a call to Tulane hospital to let Michael know the results of meeting with Ouellette, Dixie sipped the sweet vanilla drink and reflected on the meeting with Ouellette.

It hadn't been a pleasant meeting. With one officer in the hospital, two victims in the morgue, and the city getting the same paranoia as twenty years ago, City Hall was tightening its grip on Ouellette. Already his competency was being called into question, and with the recent mass murder of Giorgio "Blue-Eyed" Marcello and his men, the mayor was one more murder away from putting the city under martial law.

Ouellette, who was in a substantially foul mood, had even informed Dixie and Rodger that the mayor was considering calling in Sergeant Arsenault and his team from reserve duty. Arsenault headed up a special SWAT team affectionately called Arsenault's Arsenal. They were known for their ability to bring in a perpetrator no matter the danger. They were normally kept in reserve because of their reputation for using extreme tactics, and Arsenault himself had as many reprimands as commendations.

Everyone knew that when the Arsenal was called, shit had gotten real.

"All right, I've updated Michael on everything," said Rodger. While he still looked tired, the coffee had him looking less haggard. Rodger loved coffee—a lot.

"You know, Rodger," said Dixie, finishing up her coffee drink and tossing the bottle away, "you don't have to call Michael every time we learn something. Ouellette will update him, like he said he would. You need to let him rest and heal." She was unable to hide the concern in her voice. Michael was someone she cared for very deeply. A part of her

secretly wished that things had been different between the two of them, even though she knew that would never have worked out. But the friendship she had with him was one of the few absolutes she felt she had in her life.

“Yeah, forget that,” said Rodger, starting up the car and heading toward the lake. “Just the night before he got shot, Michael was furious with me for hiding some stuff from him. For the first time since I was paired up with the kid, I felt like I was losing a partner and a friend. And then when he needed me the most, when some crazy-ass John Woo Ninja bitch started pulling stunts from a Bruce Lee film, I could barely keep up.”

“But you saved his life,” she interjected.

Like everyone else, she didn’t know what to make of the superhuman stunts that Michael and the indigo-clad assassin, who had just killed a Jefferson Parish deputy, were rumored to have performed. Ouellette had said it was more important to find the copycat killer than to investigate “this comic book bullshit.”

Although she was on the fence about that part of it, Dixie knew that if Rodger hadn’t been there, Michael would likely have died. “At the last moment, your bullets got the assassin away from him, Rodger. It’s plain and simple. When he truly needed you, you were there for him.”

When Rodger didn’t reply, she reached over and rested her hand on his. “You’re a good partner, Rodger Bergeron, and Michael knows that.”

That seemed to scare away the dark cloud gathering on his face. “Thanks, Dixie.”

When they pulled up to the Russell mansion, the mechanical front gate was closed. Rodger pressed a small button underneath a speaker. A moment later, an older man’s voice rang out in a distinctive Creole accent. “Yes? Who is it?”

“This is Detective Rodger Bergeron with the New Orleans police,” he said. “Our boss, Commander Ouellette, called to let you know my partner and I would be showing up to speak to Mr. Russell?”

“Detective Bergeron? Well, I’ll be damned. I’ll ring you right in.”

As the front gate opened up on its own, Rodger leaned back with a confused expression.

Dixie looked over at him, cocking her head. "So this person knows you, Rodger?"

He sat there for a few moments before shaking his head and driving onto the property. "Not that I know of. I guess we'll find out. At this point, there isn't much left that could surprise me."

He drove alongside a pretty, well-tended garden with assorted trees and shrubs, as well as a few water fountains. Parking in front of the main entrance to the mansion, he shrugged. "So long as he doesn't try to feed me into a grinding machine, I'll be fine."

Dixie groaned as she got out of the car.

As they headed up the front steps, an elderly African-American male with curly gray hair and a gaunt face, dressed as a butler, came down the steps. "Detective Bergeron! I haven't seen you in so many years. How are you? How is Miss Samantha? You two still talking, right?" He shook a very surprised-looking Rodger's hand.

Dixie took a step back and rubbed her chin while regarding the man. He seemed to be well into his seventies and too frail to be an effective manservant.

Meanwhile, Rodger seemed to be faltering. "This is embarrassing, but I don't remember—"

"Oh, Lordy, forgive me," the butler interrupted. "You knew me back when I worked for"—his voice hushed, as if he were saying a bad word—"Master Castille."

Rodger's eyes widened with recognition. "Wait, Reggie?" he asked. "Reginald Washington? The chauffeur?"

Reggie smiled brightly and, clapping him on the back, led both of them into the mansion. "That's right, Detective Bergeron. After Miss Marguerite passed, Miss Gladys done canned all of us. Fortunately, Miss Samantha arranged it so that we'd be taken care of for the rest of our lives."

Dixie listened intently to Reggie's story as he led them through a foyer and up some stairs to the second floor. The interior of the house was beautiful, with dark oak beams interspersed regularly along the walls from the floor to the ceiling, several expensive-looking pieces of

artwork adorning the walls, and hardwood floors covered in exquisitely detailed rugs. She noted that the architecture had a distinctive rustic look to it that made the mansion feel homey despite its size.

She also noticed that the interior of the house was clean and everything here was as well-kept as the grounds, though she hadn't seen any maids or other servants as they passed through.

"So you received a quarter million in severance," Rodger was saying as the three of them stopped in front of a large oak door, "and yet you still came to work for Jonathan Russell?"

"Oh, yes, Detective Bergeron, that I did," replied Reggie. "I don't feel right not working. And Master Russell was always kind to me when he'd come by the Castille house. So after Miss Gladys done let me go, I asked Master Russell if I could be his chauffeur."

"And what happened?" asked Dixie, inserting herself into the conversation.

Reggie turned to her. "Well, Master Russell said he didn't need anyone to drive him, on account of him staying inside all the time, but he'd be happy to hire me on as a manservant."

"Been with him ever since, eh, Reggie?" asked Rodger.

Reggie bowed his head. "Yes, sir. But that's my story and no reason to bore you with it. Let me announce you two." He knocked on the door. After a few moments, the door opened by itself.

Dixie blinked as this happened. "You don't see that every day?"

"Oh, almost everything here is like that," he said, motioning the two detectives into a study. "I do feel bad for the burglar who tries to break in here, though. The security system Master Russell has is not very friendly."

She was about to ask him what he meant when a gruff old voice from the far side of the room said, "That'll be enough of that, Reggie."

They turned to see an elderly gentleman sitting behind a desk. He had white wispy hair and was as thin as a skeleton, his skin hanging from the bones of his face and hands as if it were moss on a tree. He wore what looked like a dark bathrobe and was breathing into an oxygen mask attached to a large tank. The mask was painted to look like the mouth and jaw of a skull.

Dixie felt that was a bit too freaky for her tastes.

Removing the oxygen mask, the old man said, "Good afternoon, Detectives Bergeron and Olivier. I'm Jonathon Russell." He motioned toward two chairs before his desk with a bony hand. "Please take a seat."

She looked at him with a mixture of curiosity and concern. She had met more than her share of elderly people, and more than her share of sick elderly people, but Jonathan surpassed them all. He looked like he could pass any day now.

She noted that the most prominent thing on his desk was a sizable red button. She also noted that behind him was a small altar with an assortment of miniature statues, skeletons in tuxedos, beautiful half-naked women, and a portrait of the Virgin Mary.

With a congenial smile, she took a seat. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Russell." Rodger also took a seat.

Reggie approached the desk. "Is there anything else I can get you, Master Russell?"

Jonathon waved him off. "No, Reggie. Thank you. That will be all. Please leave me with the detectives."

Reggie bowed politely before heading out, leaving the three of them alone.

"You'll have to forgive me if I don't shake hands. The cancer that is eating me alive makes simple movements very painful. If not for Reggie, I don't know what I'd do," said Jonathon, taking a few moments to breathe from his mask, which made him look even more dead.

"I'm sorry to hear that," said Rodger, shifting some in his seat. "Reggie seems to enjoy working for you."

Dixie recognized the tactic of getting personable with someone they were about to interview, as it was a tactic she had used successfully many times before.

"Reggie is a good man. I felt bad when Gladys Castille fired him. He's not a very useful servant, but he's loyal and he looks after me. And at my age, I really appreciate loyalty, Detectives."

She looked him over, noting an ornate ring with a crest on it—a red cross with a golden crown. Sorting that design away for later, she said, "If you don't mind me asking, Mr. Russell, where is the rest of your staff? I only saw Reggie here, and there's no way just one elderly man can care for this entire estate."

He chortled. “My dear Detective, I don’t have anyone else on staff. I contract out a maid service and a gardening service to care for my home. I have my meals catered to me every day.” He took a deep breath from his mask and then he coughed a few times. “I don’t generally like people. Not anymore.”

“And I’m sure it’s more cost effective,” Dixie said politely, trying to keep the conversation going. “Much more so than having a full-time staff.”

Giving a short, loud snort, Jonathan said, “I don’t have any heirs or any family left, Detective. When I die, whatever I have left goes to Reggie. Why should I care how much of the Russell estate I squander?”

Dixie shook her head. *Wow. What a jaded old grouch.* But she figured she probably would be, too, if she were dying a slow, painful death.

“But enough talk of my short remaining lifespan,” he said, leaning forward in his chair. “Your commander told me that you have something very important to talk to me about. And Louis wouldn’t bother me if it wasn’t important. So then, what is it, Detectives?”

Dixie blinked, surprised that he was on a first-name basis with her commander.

Rodger pulled a folded-up piece of paper out of his overcoat. “I made this at the library last night. It’s a copy of a newspaper clipping of you, Vincent and Gladys Castille, and someone named Gerald Robichaux. It mentions a ‘Modern Priory.’ Do you remember that?” He passed the paper over to Jonathon.

Jonathon slid his bony fingers over the image. He smiled in a way that looked more bitter than reminiscent. “Ah, yes. Our donation to Southern Baptist Hospital. I remember that. Vincent was so happy the Priory was supporting modernized medicine.” Pushing the paper back toward Rodger, he said, “But this isn’t about a trip down memory lane, is it, Detective?”

Rodger shook his head. “No. I’ll be honest with you, Mr. Russell, we’re at a dead end with an important lead in our investigation of the new Bourbon Street Ripper.”

“Oh? What lead is that, Detective?”

Rodger leaned forward on one elbow. “We keep coming across something called the Nite Priory. What is it?”

To their surprise, Jonathon laughed, so hard in fact that he started wheezing and hacking, his eyes bulging in considerable pain and his face turning red.

Quickly, Dixie got up and helped Jonathon get his oxygen mask back on.

As he breathed deeply and calmed down, she noticed dozens upon dozens of buttons behind the desk. *What the—? What are those for?* She wondered if they controlled parts of the house, like the door that had just opened. She anxiously eyed the large red button, remembering Reggie’s statement about feeling bad for a burglar. She had a feeling it was not a nice button.

Once she was sure he was breathing normally again, she went back to her chair. He and this house were starting to creep her out. She just wanted the interview to be over.

“Are you all right, Mr. Russell?” asked Rodger, concerned.

“Yes, yes. I apologize for that,” said Jonathon. “But this is my own penance for my own sins. The good Lord saw fit to strike me down with an aggressive form of cancer that will, to be blunt, end my life in excruciating pain.”

Dixie was about to offer more condolences when he said, “But you want to know about the Priory. Instead of telling you about it, I’ll show you.” With a trembling hand, he pressed a button under his desk.

There was a click, then a motorized sound, and then the wall panel beside Rodger slid open. Both detectives watched as a small bookcase, framed in black velvet, rolled forward. In it were what looked like old, leather-bound tomes and dozens of rolled-up parchments. It looked like something from a monastery.

“The dark red book on the top, Detective,” said Jonathon, pointing with a skeletal finger. “Can you read Creole?”

“A little,” said Rodger, taking the book. It was as dark as blood. The cover had an embossing of the same design as Jonathon’s ring—a cross with a crown.

Dixie took note of this. Perhaps that was their emblem, a family crest.

Jonathon gestured toward the book with a shaky hand. "The page you want is where the black ribbon rests, Detective."

Dixie traded glances with Rodger, the anxiousness on his face matching her own. The interview had officially become creepy.

When Rodger opened the book to where the black ribbon was marked, Dixie saw an intricate drawing of what looked like a group of men in black hooded robes. They were all holding chalices up toward a heart pierced by a sword and wrapped in thorns.

Rodger read slowly. "The Knight Priory of Saint Madonna." He looked over at her. "Knight spelled like, um, a knight. You know, armor and swords. Not the way we've seen it spelled."

She looked at the picture more closely. Something wasn't right, but she couldn't put her finger on it.

"The Knight Priory of Saint Madonna," said Jonathon, leaning back in his chair. "Formation dates back to the founding of New Orleans.

"Originally, the Knight Priory was a group of French nobles who believed in the purity of blood as a right to rule. They believed that as some of the first founders of the Port of New Orleans, that rule was their right. Over the course of this city's history, the Knight Priory gained complete control over the trade routes, businesses, and even its construction."

She suddenly realized what was off-putting about the image of the hooded men. "Mr. Russell," she said, pointing at the image, "the eyes of each of these men are hollow, lifeless. Like they're all dead."

Jonathon nodded. "Yes. Indeed, Detective. Very observant. You see, the Knight Priory, for all its roots in Christianity and pledges to the Virgin Mary, put considerable stock in Haitian voodoo. While homage was always given to the mother of Christ, the real deities worshipped were Papa Ghede, Madame Brigitte, and Baron Samedi, the three chief loa."

"Loa?" asked Dixie.

"Spirits," said Rodger, his lips tightening. "Sam called it correctly. There is a voodoo cult involved here."

Jonathan snorted sarcastically. "Well, if this 'Sam' you are referring to is Samantha Castille, I'm not surprised that she would think

that. You see . . .” He leaned forward and stared at them. “Samantha is the reason the Knight Priory of Saint Madonna isn’t the same organization it used to be.”

Dixie blinked, feeling quite lost.

“Please, tell me what happened with Sam,” Rodger said, finally sitting down again.

Jonathon again leaned back and took a long series of inhales from his mask. Then he started speaking.

“The Knight Priory was always run by the Castille family. Vincent, his father, his father’s father, and so on. While their public face changed over the centuries to include groups such as the Mardi Gras Krewe of Comus, behind closed doors, the Knight Priory basically remained a secret order that ran New Orleans. And they—we, I should say—routinely practiced voodoo rituals.”

“Voodoo rituals? Like what?” asked Dixie. In the back of her mind, she was trying to understand how this Knight Priory related to the Nite Priory referenced by the copycat killer. She wasn’t completely sure it was the same thing.

“Oh, the usual,” he said casually, as if he were teaching a class. “Blood sacrifices of barnyard animals, maddened dancing as if possessed, and sexual rituals. What you’d expect from a Haitian religion.”

She felt yet another degree more disturbed.

Rodger seemed unfazed by that. Instead, he asked, “So what happened with Sam? You said ‘we’ practiced voodoo, so, obviously, you were a member.” The concern and urgency in his voice was apparent.

Dixie flashed Rodger a look and shook her head. *Don’t get too worked up about Sam, Rodger.* Sam was a suspect and Rodger was already on the edge with Ouellette. One more screw-up like he’d had with Dr. Klein and he would get suspended.

Jonathon pursed his lips in obvious pain and continued. “Indeed, I was. What happened with Sam was truly a mistake. Vincent was concerned over her health when she was younger. I don’t remember the details, but she had medical problems. Vincent had been searching for a way to help her when he learned about an African compound called the *tkeeus*.” The foreign word had an African-style *click* at the beginning.

Taking another breath from his oxygen mask, he added, "Vincent was convinced that doing a ritual with the *tkeus* would help Samantha's condition."

Dixie furrowed her brow. He was talking about a voodoo ritual with Sam when she was only a child, in a group that practiced blood and sex rituals. *What in God's name did they do to her?*

She found her mind going dark places, postulating the horrible things that could have happened. Quickly pulling herself back before she could succumb to those thoughts, she said, "Well, it sounds like Vincent was doing some crazy stuff with his granddaughter. What happened?"

"Well, if you had asked Vincent, he would have told you that the ritual worked. If you had asked anyone else, they would have told you it was a disastrous failure." He chortled morbidly.

"The ritual started just fine. But halfway through, Samantha went into a convulsion. According to Vincent, she suffered a massive seizure. Now, I'm no doctor, but I've never seen a seizure that would make a five-year-old girl strong enough to knock back grown men. Samantha, for a few moments, had strength no human being could possess."

Dixie stared, completely transfixed by Jonathon's story.

"After that night, the Knight Priory only met two more times. They met once to try the ritual with a different girl, and then they met so that the older members, such as myself, could announce retirement. After that, the younger generation took over, turning the Knight Priory into more of an underground political group and less of an occult secret brotherhood." He coughed a few loud, hacking coughs.

"Everything I know about voodoo says that rituals are only as malevolent as the will of the people performing them, but something evil happened that night with young Samantha. Ever since then, most of the old guard like myself have been dying off from some disease or another. It's like we're cursed." He took a few deep breaths from the mask. "Or maybe that's exactly what happened. Maybe we all cursed ourselves that night."

A light went off in Dixie's head. An exotic incense had been mentioned in Michael's report. He had said that soon after inhaling it, he

had started doing things that would be considered superhuman. One look at Rodger, and she knew he was wondering the same thing—could Michael have inhaled the *tkeeus*?

She didn't believe in voodoo or demons, either, but a drug that enhanced people's strength wasn't completely impossible.

"So where did Vincent find this tah-keese?" she asked, stumbling over the word.

Jonathon rubbed his chin for a long time, a contemplative look on his face. "You know, I actually don't remember. I know he learned about the *tkeeus* from someone. But that was so many years ago. I'm going to have to think on that one, Detectives."

She nodded. "We'll follow up with you on that, Mr. Russell. I'm sure it's important."

"So two more questions, Mr. Russell, and then we'll get going," said Rodger. "First off, who was the other person this ritual was performed on? Second, the copycat killer is spelling 'Knight Priory' as 'N-I-T-E' Priory. Any idea what that means?"

Jonathon took a long breath from his oxygen mask. "The other person was one of the daughters of the housekeeper, Josephine Patterson. Don't ask me which one, because I don't remember."

Dixie looked over at Rodger. She had no idea who the Pattersons were. However, when he nodded thoughtfully, she was sure he had to know.

She could grill him for what he knew about the *tkeeus*, the Pattersons, and everything else on the ride back.

Leaning forward, she asked, "And the other question, Mr. Russell? About someone spelling 'Knight Priory' incorrectly?"

To her surprise, Jonathon laughed again. "My dear Detective Olivier," he finally said after more than a few hacking coughs, "I do believe the killer is playing the police for fools."

About the Author

Leo King was born in New Orleans, Louisiana, and moved to Houston, Texas, in 2005 after Hurricane Katrina. He works during the day and writes at night, usually juggling several projects at once.

He lives with his wife, his Playstation 3s, and more stuffed lions than an adult should probably own. His education is in game development, and he often uses the structured approach of game design in developing his stories.

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The Bourbon Street Ripper is still at large. Three victims have met with horrific ends. With both of their partners out of commission, detectives Rodger Bergeron and Dixie Olivier must team up to track down the killer.

Meanwhile, Sam Castille and Richie Fastellos try to clear Sam's name as the evidence mounts against her. With the mystery of the original killings starting to come full circle, the race is on to stop the copycat before another falls prey!

“Exactly the twisted, scary, and thrilling sequel to *The Bourbon Street Ripper* that I hoped for; I can’t wait for the finale to the trilogy!”

— **Jason Kristopher**, author of *The Dying of the Light*



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