

Chapter One

It was the kids that got to him. Every damned time. Even now that Social Services had taken the little girl away, New Orleans PD homicide detective Reed Ware couldn't get the crumpled, tear-stained face of the mop-haired five-year-old who had just watched her mama get shot to death out of his mind. He needed a drink. Several drinks. Hell, a whole bottle of Jack Daniel's, hold the glass.

For a moment, he craved the smoky smoothness of whiskey on his tongue. Then he reminded himself that he didn't drink anymore.

And refused to allow himself to remember the reason why.

Do not go there.

It was just after 3 a.m. on December 23. Two full days to go before Christmas, and the seasonal crime wave was in full swing. Something about the holidays—the pressure of dealing with family, the loneliness of those without family or whose families were broken, the expectations, the disappointments, and in New Orleans especially, the booze and drugs—added up to a measurable uptick in the number of murders and violent crimes as people looked forward (or not) to the arrival of good old St. Nick.

Peace and goodwill toward all, anybody?

The cracked brick sidewalk Reed was standing on was shrouded in shadows that were kept from being dangerously dark only by the gassy yellow streetlights that dotted the French Quarter. Despite the lateness of the hour, even this out-of-the-way area near Canal Street was not quite deserted. A couple of onlookers huddled together across the street, faceless in the dark as they watched the comings and goings of the investigation. A few more people slunk along the sidewalks, oblivious or uncaring. Somewhere not too far away, he could hear a street musician on a violin playing what sounded like “Oh Holy Night.”

The irony of it didn't escape him.

He was just coming off his shift, which had run way longer than expected because he had been, what else, investigating a homicide—the homicide of that little girl's mother to be precise. It was horrible. And it was the job. The job that paid for the dinged-up six-year-old Ford Explorer—his personal vehicle—waiting for him at the curb and the dinged up two-bedroom cottage with the dinged-up microwave dinner in the freezer waiting for him a dozen blocks away in Bywater.

He hadn't chosen to become a cop for the salary. Or the perks. Or the hours. Or the,

well, anything. Except once, a long time ago, a cop was all he had ever wanted to be.

Look at him now: thirty-five years old, no family, precious few friends, not even a cat to go home to. Living the dream, he thought wryly.

Laissez les bon temps rouler. Let the good times roll.

“Merry Christmas, huh?” That weary remark came from his new partner, Bob Terry, as he caught up to Reed in front of the run-down apartment building where the murder scene was still being processed. Terry had actually been his partner for a little over a year now, but Reed called him his new partner to differentiate Terry from his old partner, Elliot DeBlassis, who’d moved to Boston at the insistence of his new wife, Helena, who was from there. She had gotten sick of the heat and humidity that were as much a part of the city as gumbo and jazz—along with, of course, the crime and the gangs and the never-ending violence and threat of danger to her husband that was part of being a cop in New Orleans.

She’s the smart one, was what Reed had told Elliot at the time. Parting from his longtime partner and closest friend would have been hard, except by then he’d become so emotionally numb that nothing had really bothered him anymore.

“Yeah,” he replied to Terry. Terry was thirty-three, about Reed’s own height of six two, husky and blond, where Reed was lean and dark, and at the moment packing an extra twenty pounds or so from sympathy eating while his wife, Mia, had been pregnant. The infant was three months old now, and Terry was looking haggard from lack of sleep. “You go on home. I’ll do the paperwork.”

That was the thing about crime: it always came with paperwork. Reams of it.

Terry was a good guy. He even hesitated a minute. “You sure?”

Reed waved him away. “Tell Mia she owes me one.”

“Will do. Thanks.” Terry took off down the line of police vehicles that had parked alongside the curb toward his own seen-better-days Honda Accord.

Reed watched Terry leave, then got in the Explorer and headed toward the Eighth District Station House. People moved along the sidewalks in ones and twos, little more than black shapes in the darkness, most of them holding the plastic cups in which they were allowed to carry alcoholic beverages on the streets as they flitted from bar to bar. The bars had no closing time, and the people who frequented them all had about the same amount of restraint, or lack thereof, which led to a lot of booze-related crime. The Christmas decorations were up, twinkly festoons of greenery hanging from the wrought iron balconies, wreaths on the doors of every other shop, red bows on every other post. Like the Quarter itself, the decorations looked slightly seedy, shabby, raffish. So late at night, the atmosphere was straight out of Dickens. Or Interview with the Vampire.

He was just turning onto Royal Street when his cell phone rang.

A glance at the name on his screen made him frown. Elizabeth Townes? He didn't know anybody by that name, as far as he could remember.

Suspicion narrowed his eyes. Only a very few people had his personal cell phone number.

"Ware," he answered.

"Hey, Dick, you want to see what I'm talking about, you get yourself over to Grandma's House and come on down that alley back there." Even if the dick hadn't been a dead giveaway—it was a smart-ass way of shortening detective—Reed would have recognized the voice instantly, despite its current barely audible whisper. It belonged to Hollis Bayard. Holly was an eighteen-year-old street tough whose rap sheet ranged from theft (stealing things like cell phones from unsuspecting tourists), to underage drinking, to marijuana possession, to assault on a police officer. All of which, fortunately for him, occurred before he had turned eighteen two months before. Since the magic birthday that had made him a legal adult, he'd managed to avoid being picked up. Reed had zero confidence that Holly's luck would last. "Shit's popping right now."

The whisper was the giveaway: Holly was close to whatever was going down. If he knew Holly, he was too damned close. Reed felt his gut clench. For whatever unfathomable reason, he felt a small amount of responsibility toward the kid. The Quarter was one of those places where minding your own business was prized. You didn't, you could get yourself killed. Lately, minding his own business wasn't Holly's strong point. Grandma's House was slang for the headquarters of the 110ers gang, a murderous bunch of drug and gun traffickers that even the cops were afraid of. If Holly got in their way, he'd be floating facedown in the muddy brown waters of the Mississippi before morning.

"You haul ass out of there," Reed ordered. He was already hanging a hard left and putting the pedal to the metal. Luckily at this time of night vehicular traffic in the Quarter was almost nil. "You hear me? Whatever it is, I'll handle it. I'm on my way."

"Holy fuck," Holly muttered, not in response to anything Reed had said, and the phone disconnected. Reed listened to the buzzing sound with a combination of alarm and wrath. He'd known Holly and his family since the kid was maybe ten years old, when, as a vice cop, he'd busted Holly's prostitute mother, Magnolia. He'd discovered her two little kids—Holly and his then five-year-old brother, Anton, universally known as Ant—curled up asleep in the propped-open trunk of the beat-up Saturn where she'd been turning tricks. Holly was a pain in the ass, one of those kids who found trouble like water found low ground, but he wasn't bad at heart. Over the years, as Reed had busted Magnolia multiple times and then, after he got promoted out of vice, been around as other cops had busted her, he'd gotten to know Holly and Ant pretty well. He'd found

himself looking out for them a little, doling out advice and warnings, to which they mostly didn't listen, trying to steer them away from getting involved with the gangs running rampant in the city, providing protection if he was around and they needed it, offering them the occasional meal, and handing over a few bucks when one of them particularly needed something, like shoes. Six months ago, Magnolia had been shot to death along with her drug dealer boyfriend. It hadn't been Reed's case, but he'd informally looked into it anyway and saw no reason to disagree with the findings: they'd been the victims of a rival pusher, who'd since bit the big one himself, as the result of more street crime. Holly had a bee in his bonnet, a crackpot theory, about who had killed his mother. Unfortunately for the kid's peace of mind, it didn't jibe with the official version. It was, in a word, wrong, but Holly had been slinking around, listening to rumors floating on the streets, sticking his nose into places he was better off keeping out of, trying to prove otherwise.

From that phone call, Reed had little doubt that Holly was at his amateur sleuthing again.

You're going to get your idiot self killed, was the furious thought Reed sent winging Holly's way as he jerked the Explorer around on practically two wheels to make yet another tight corner. What it came down to was that Holly, and Ant, too, were still reeling from their mother's death. Magnolia had had her faults, but she had been a fiercely protective mother who had loved her two sons. Against long odds, she'd managed to keep both boys in school, and when she'd died in June Holly had been on track to graduate high school in one more year, while Ant had just finished up fifth grade. Since then, Holly had pretty much gone to school when he'd felt like it, which Reed suspected hadn't been all that much. Ant was doing better about school attendance, but only because Holly, in classic "don't do what I do, do what I say" mode, stayed on his case about it.

Magnolia might not have suited everyone's idea of what a good mother should be, but, in Reed's eyes, and more important in those of her children, she'd been a good mother nonetheless. The way the two boys had hung together since her death was a case in point: she had raised them to love each other. And they had loved her. As Reed had gotten to know her, he'd respected her for that. "I got to put food on the table," Reed had heard her reply once to a bar owner who was giving her grief about setting up shop too near his establishment. "I got to put a roof over my kids' heads. Ain't nobody else gonna take care of them if I don't." She was always getting and losing minimum-wage jobs, but as she'd put it, "I can work forty damn hours for what I can earn in four hours turning tricks. And while I'm out there scrubbing toilets for diddly-squat, who's going to keep my boys out of trouble?" Which she had done her best to do.

Reed still remembered seeing her take a broom to members of the St. Mary Mafia, an offshoot of the 110ers, when they had shown up outside her apartment building to try to get Holly to go somewhere with them. Wielding that broom like a baseball bat, she'd charged out of the building and whopped upside the head three or four of the meanest young toughs in the city, sending them scampering away like rats. Then she had turned

around and whopped Holly upside the head with her broom, too, for going outside to talk to them. “You ain’t getting into that shit,” he’d heard her yelling at Holly even as, weapon in hand, Reed had stepped out of his car—he and DeBlassis had been cruising through the complex looking for a suspect—in case the vanquished punks had decided to turn back around and mother and son had needed more protection than just Magnolia’s broom.

The small apartment that Magnolia, Holly, and Ant had shared—lost, now, in the wake of Magnolia’s death—had been for the most part a happy place. In the last year or so of her life Magnolia’s twin weaknesses—feel-good drugs and no-good men—had begun to take a toll. Every loser who had passed through her life had been a bad influence in one way or another, and with the last one, the drug dealer with whom she’d been killed, she’d spiraled as low as Reed had ever seen her. She and Holly had been fighting pretty much nonstop over her escalating drug use and her scumbag boyfriend in the days before she had died, and Reed suspected that guilt over that was mixed in with Holly’s grief. Whether or not that was the case, Magnolia’s death had hit Holly—and Ant—hard. It was still a constant presence in their thoughts, their lives, their dreams. They were still in denial, still going through those useless if only I had done this or that differently, it wouldn’t have happened that way scenarios in their minds.

Reed understood. He’d been there himself. Sometimes, although with lessening frequency now, he found himself back there. He was pretty sure that that was one of the reasons he’d bonded like he had with Holly and Ant over the last few months: he knew what it was like to lose the person you loved most in the world. He knew what it was like to feel like you were slowly bleeding to death inside.

Three years before, he’d lost his own young son in a car accident that had also killed his ex-wife. The world had been a different place for him ever since. What had once been brightly colored and full of warmth and life was now gray and cold and dead. From the time of his son’s death until Magnolia had died, nothing and no one had been able to penetrate the icy barrier of grief and regret that had encased him. But in Holly’s and Ant’s anguish, he’d seen a reflection of his own. Those boys had needed someone, and for lack of any alternative, that someone had turned out to be him. The three of them had somehow managed to grab hold of one another in the darkness, and now, for better or worse, they were connected.

He didn’t particularly like it, but there it was: they turned to him when they needed help, and he looked out for them when he could.

Since Magnolia’s death, Ant had been placed in a foster home, from which he ‘d promptly run away to rejoin Holly (nobody in officialdom seemed to care), who crashed with his girlfriend Edie’s large family in a tiny apartment on Port Street when they would have him, and on various friends’ couches when they wouldn’t. Several times lately, Reed had gotten home in the middle of the night to find Holly and Ant sacked out on his front porch. He’d taken them in, let them sleep out what was left of the night in his spare bedroom, fed them breakfast in the morning, and then, the daylight and full stomachs

making them cocky, the boys had been on their way.

So far, Holly had even managed to refrain from stealing anything from Reed, which, given his predilection for small electronics and the fact that Reed's house contained a lot of them, was something.

To Reed's mild surprise, Grandma's House—a seedy storefront on the wrong side of Elysian Fields—was dark as a grave. Nobody on the sidewalk out front. Not a wino, not a punk, not a pusher, not a hooker. No activity at all. No sign of Holly or anyone else. Just mist wafting like smoke down the sidewalk, illuminated by a fragment of moonlight from the not-quite-full ghostly circle hanging high in the onyx sky. The narrow mouth of an alley yawned black as a tar pit to the building's left. Cursing under his breath, Reed parked and got out.

No sign of Holly. Too much to hope that the kid had listened to him for once and left the scene. No, Holly was down that alley, in the thick of whatever he'd summoned Reed to see. Reed knew it as well as he knew his own name.

Goddamn it.

He could smell the dampness of the river, the smoky, boozy essence of the Quarter, and a hint of ripe garbage, too, as, gun drawn, he headed down the alley. He moved fast but cautiously, his footsteps quiet on the uneven cobblestones. A couple of paces in, and the darkness swallowed him up. Two—and three-story brick buildings formed a solid wall on either side of what was a narrow, uneven canyon. As his eyes adjusted, he saw that the walls were windowless. Metal garbage cans, most of them missing their lids, stood in clusters around recessed doorways. All was quiet except for the hum of distant noise from elsewhere in the Quarter and a steady drip of water somewhere nearer at hand. It made Reed think of the swamp he'd grown up in, how you could always tell when a predator was nearby because all the birds had flown away.

Something's wrong. His pulse rate quickened along with his step. He was on high alert now, scanning the shadows with care even as he focused on the lessening of dark at the end of the alley, which, if memory served him correctly, opened onto a small church with a surrounding cemetery.

Whatever's going down is probably going down there. Even as he had the thought, he caught a glimmer of movement out of the corner of his eye. A split-second later, something leaped out of a doorway and rushed him.

His heart jumped.

“Dick!” The cry was no less heartfelt for being scarcely louder than a whisper.

Not Holly: Ant. Jesus Christ, a man with less steady nerves would have shot the kid. Unlike Holly's, Ant's usage of Dick was entirely without malice: it was simply what he'd

learned, from a young age, to call the police detective who'd been a fixture in his life for as long as he could remember. Thirteen now, skinny and undersized, black hair buzzed and big eyes shining in the darkness, he grabbed the sleeve of Reed's sport jacket and bounced up and down on the balls of his feet with agitation as he pointed toward the end of the alley.

"Holly's down there. Some guys came—I think he's watching them rob some people." Ant sounded breathless.

Doing his best to tamp down the curses that crowded to the tip of his tongue, Reed was already moving again—faster but still deliberate—in that direction, with Ant, having let go of Reed's jacket, trotting beside him.

"You follow him here?" he asked Ant in a growly undertone, because to Holly's credit, Reed knew that if he'd thought something bad was going to go down, he wouldn't have brought his little brother anywhere near it. Ant shrugged guiltily. Reed had his answer: yes. "My car's out there on the street. Go crawl under it and wait for me."

In Reed's experience, even in the deadliest of street confrontations, even if the bullets were flying and the bad guys were mowing each other down like weeds, nobody ever looked under a vehicle for potential targets. Therefore, especially at night and for a kid Ant's size, having him take shelter beneath a vehicle was way safer than, say, passing over the keys to the Explorer and telling him to hide in the backseat. Everybody always looked in the backseat.

"What?" The look Ant gave him was disbelieving.

Reed's answer was short. "Do what I tell you."

"But I don't—"

The rest of Ant's words were lost as a woman screamed.

The terror-filled sound sliced through the darkness like a knife, making Reed's muscles tense and the hair on the back of his neck catapult upright as his gaze snapped toward the sound. A split second later the sharp pop pop pop pop of gunfire exploded through the alley. It was close, loud, and almost certainly coming from the cemetery just a couple of dozen yards ahead.

Shit.

"Go get under my damn car," he barked at Ant as he broke into a dead run and, at the same time, yanked his radio from his belt. Out of the corner of his eye he watched Ant melt back into the shadows. Damned pain-in-the-ass kid—would he do as he was told? "Officer needs assistance at—"

He had just finished giving the address as he burst out of the alley into streaming moonlight, then pulled up to orient himself, pressing his back against the flat wall of the side of the last building. Juiced by adrenaline, blinking against what felt like a sudden onslaught of brightness, it was all he could do to stop himself before he possibly got in trouble, to give himself time to let his eyes adjust and conduct a lightning survey of the scene. An ancient wrought iron fence edged the cemetery that was just a couple of yards away. The fence surrounded an overgrown lot, which housed a church in the middle—equally ancient, no more than a chapel really, a one-story brick shoebox with a crooked steeple. Behind it—he had exited the alley at the back of the church, which faced out on a narrow residential street—monuments ranging from knee-high marble arches to six-foot-tall stone angels leaned mostly out of plumb and cast long shadows over weed-infested plots. A slamming of doors and a squealing of tires made him look sharply toward the street in front of the church, although he couldn't see the vehicle in question because the church itself was in the way. The buildings across from the church were dark and deserted: not a soul in sight. A whooshing sound, and he knew the vehicle was gone.

Movement nearby brought his focus instantly back closer at hand.

Holly stepped out of the shadow of one of the stone angels. Five ten, lanky in the way of a kid who hadn't yet filled out, wearing his uniform of jeans and a hoodie, he impatiently pushed his too-long black hair back behind his ears as he struggled with a small object that he was holding up in front of his face. A phone, Reed identified a second later. Elizabeth Townes' stolen phone, almost certainly. Holly was focusing the phone, as well as every bit of his attention, on something that appeared to be on the ground in front of him. Something that the darkness, and the shifting shadows, and the monuments that semi-blocked his view prevented Reed from seeing.

Holly was taking pictures with the phone. Of what? Reed couldn't yet tell, but the quick answer was, it couldn't be anything good.

Reed thrust the radio back into position on his belt, tightened his grip on his gun, then took a running step and vaulted the thigh-high fence.

"Holly." His footsteps were soundless in the overgrown grass. His voice was quiet as he came up to the kid. Holly cut a glance at him. Visually probing the darkness all around, Reed identified no threat. But danger and violence hung in the air: like any good cop, he could feel them in his bones the way some people feel rain.

"I saw 'em! I told you! They acted like they wanted to make a buy, and then they shot them!" It was an emotion-packed whisper. Holly's hands shook. His eyes were wild. "I got pictures. I think. This damned phone—"

"Yo. Everything okay?" Ant slunk up behind them.

Holly turned on him. "I told you not to follow me!"

“I told you to get under the damned car!” Reed growled at almost the same moment. Of course Ant hadn’t done as he was told. By either of them. That was Ant.

Ant threw up his hands in a gesture meant to be placating. “I thought you all might need some help.”

“From you?” Holly countered scornfully.

Reed missed the rest of that brotherly exchange, because by then his eyes had adjusted enough to find what he was praying he wouldn’t see—victims, sprawled in the shadow of an above-the-ground crypt maybe thirty feet away.

His gut tightened.

“Fuck.” Reed felt more tired than he could remember feeling in a long time as he started toward the motionless figures. He had little doubt that they were dead, probably as Holly had said, the victims of a drug deal gone bad, just a few more casualties of the escalating, gang-related violence that was tearing the city apart. So many murders provided him with job security and all that, but truth was this shit was getting old. Even he, hardened to violent death as he was, was beginning to be sickened by all of it.

Not for the first time, he wondered if he was in danger of getting burned out.

“It’s the same thing that happened to Mom.” Holly’s whisper was urgent as, with Ant trailing him like a shadow, he followed Reed. Crouching to check each victim in turn for a pulse—there were four of them, two adult males, an adult female, and a boy who looked like he was about Ant’s age—Reed registered the raw meat smell of fresh blood with a grimace. What looked like oily black halos leached into the grass around each victim’s head. He placed two fingers beneath the ear of the youngest victim. Like the others, he had a bullet hole between his eyes. Nice and neat. Death would have been instantaneous. No pulse, big surprise, although the boy was still warm. His wide-open eyes were already glazed and vacant as he stared sightlessly up at the night sky.

Another goddamned kid. Two minutes earlier, and I might have been able to save him.

Reed could feel the pounding of his own pulse in his temples.

“You listening to me?” Holly demanded, and Reed frowned up at him. The teen was standing over him, waving the stolen phone practically in his face. Holly continued, “This time I saw them. For real. I even took pictures. I mean, if I did it right. Anyway, it’s like I told you: it’s the five-o.”

By five-o, Holly meant the cops.

“Would you give it a rest?” For an instant, as he held Holly’s gaze, a graphic mental

picture of Magnolia's corpse flashed in front of Reed's eyes. A once-pretty woman aged prematurely by the life she'd led, she'd had a bullet hole drilled through her forehead, too, just like all four of these victims did. Thing was, though, as every officer who went through the police academy learned, torso shots were the high percentage shots. A couple of rounds from a 9mm pumped into a chest would stop pretty much anything. Head shots like these were the trademark of gang members, not cops. "No way in hell were they cops."

"Way." Holly darted a glance in the direction of the fast approaching sirens that were growing louder with every second, and shifted nervously from foot to foot. "What, you think I don't know what I saw? I'm telling you the truth."

"Give me that phone." Reed stood up abruptly and took the phone from Holly's hand, ignoring the kid's indignant "Hey!" in response. The victims were beyond help: there was nothing Reed or anyone else could do for them except find out who had killed them. As an eyewitness to the murders, Holly would be invaluable to the investigation—with or without a phone full of pictures—and he would also be dead, just as soon as the perps found out about him and what he had seen. Holstering his gun, Reed slid the phone into his pocket, pulled out his keys, and wrested away his house key from the others.

"Go to my house. You and Ant. Let yourselves in, and stay put until I get there. Don't talk to anybody about this or anything else. Do not tell anyone that you were at the scene of these murders. Hear?"

"What am I, stupid?" Holly asked with disgust. He caught the key Reed tossed him without argument, which told Reed that he knew just how deep he was in the shit. Casting another wary glance in the direction from which the sirens were shrieking now as the posse Reed had summoned closed in, Holly thrust the key into the front pocket of his jeans, then looked at Reed again. "I ain't lying. I swear. It was a bunch of cops. Like, four."

"We'll hash this out when I get home," Reed told him. "Go."

"Yeah." Holly grabbed Ant by the arm. "Come on," he said to his brother.

Lips compressed, Reed watched Holly and Ant scramble over the fence and vanish into the dark as, lights flashing, a pair of squad cars slammed to a shuddering halt in front of the church.